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We don't have to tell you that Bennett Cerf's "Trade Winds" in the S R of L is one of the liveliest columns ever to bellwether an otherwise dignified and highbrow literary journal. Nautically speaking, Mr. Cerf spins many a dippy, to say nothing of many a cuffer, and some of them are obviously spun from the winch; and on occasion they involve detective-story writers who, believe it or not, are human enough to inspire anecdotes — just like historical novelists, sonneteers, and picture-book captionists.

Now, it seems that Frances and Richard Lockridge bought a lakeside cottage in the thirties (the 1930s, not the East Thirties in New York), and this cottage was the Eden spot of Connecticut, except that like the original Eden it had one fault: the grass on the front lawn simply would not grow according to the seed advertisements.

One day the Lockridges were invited to a neighbor's house, and lo and behold, the neighbor's lawn was like green velvet. And what was the neighbor's secret of growing grass? Why, an elaborate and expensive sprinkler system — you know, those underground pipes that go on and off automatically, watering each and every blade of grass.

"Where does this gent get the money to grow such wonderful grass?" asked Mr. Lockridge of another guest.

"He writes detective stories," said the guest. "His name is Rex Stout."

It is said on good authority — to wit, Mr. Cerf — that the Lockridges sat down that very evening and began plotting their first detective story. Thus, it can also be said, Mr. and Mrs. North owe their existence more to a sprinkler system than to any other proximate cause.

But that's not the point of this anecdote.

Here is one of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe yarns that has helped Mr. Stout pay for his velvet lawns, that has made it possible for Mr. Stout to be a gentleman-farmer in the grand tradition and a horticulturist in the grand 'tec tradition; but it should not be forgotten that Mr. Stout, with the assistance of his farmer-neighbors, built the fourteen-room house which now stands amid his velvet lawns with his own hands. . . .

BULLET FOR ONE

by REX STOUT

IT WAS her complexion that made it hard to believe she was as scared as she said she was.

"Maybe I haven't made it clear," she persisted, twisting her fingers some more, though I had asked her to stop. "I'm not making anything up, really I'm not. If they framed me once isn't

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that a good enough reason to think they are doing it again?"

If her cheek color had been from a drugstore, with the patches showing because the fear in her heart was using extra blood for internal needs, I would probably have been affected more. But at first sight of her I had been reminded of a picture on a calendar hanging on the wall of Sam's Diner on Eleventh Avenue, a picture of a round-faced girl with one hand holding a pail and the other resting on the flank of a cow she had just milked or was just going to milk. It was her to a T, in skin tint, build, and innocence.

She quit the finger-twisting to make tight little fists. "Is he really such a puffed-up baboon?" she demanded. "They'll be here in twenty minutes and I've got to see him first!" Suddenly she was out of the chair, on her feet. "Where is he, upstairs?"

Having suspected she was subject to impulses, I had, instead of crossing to my desk, held a position between her and the door to the hall.

"Give it up," I advised her. "When you stand up you tremble — I noticed that when you came in — so sit down. I've tried to explain, Miss Rooney, that while this room is Mr. Wolfe's office, the rest of this building is his home. From nine to eleven in the morning, and from four to six in the afternoon, he is absolutely at home, up in the plant-rooms with his orchids, and bigger men than you have had to like it. But what I've seen of you, I think possibly you're nice, and I'll do you a favor."

"What?"

"Sit down and quit trembling."

She sat down.

"I'll go up and tell him about you."

"What will you tell him?"

"I'll remind him that a man named Ferdinand Pohl phoned this morning and made a date, for himself and four others, to come here to see Mr. Wolfe at six o'clock, which is sixteen minutes from now. I'll tell him your name is Audrey Rooney and you're one of the four others, and you're fairly good-looking and may be nice, and you're scared stiff because, as you tell it, they're pretending they think it was Talbott, but actually they're getting set to frame you, and —"

"Not all of them."

"Anyhow, some. I'll tell him that you came ahead of time to see him alone and inform him that you have not murdered anyone, specifically not Sigmund Keyes, and to warn him that he must watch these stinkers like a hawk."

"It sounds crazy — like that!"

"I'll put feeling in it."

She left her chair again, came to me in three swift steps, flattened her palms on my coat front, and tilted her head back to get my eyes. "You may be nice too," she said hopefully.

"That would be too much to expect," I told her, as I turned and made for the stairs in the hall.

Ferdinand Pohl was speaking.

Sitting there in the office with my chair swiveled so that my back was to my desk, with Wolfe himself behind

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his desk to my left, I took Pohl in. He was close to twice my age. Seated in the red leather chair beyond the end of Wolfe's desk, with his leg-crossing histing his pants so that five inches of bare skin showed above his garterless sock, there was nothing about him to command attention except an unusual assortment of facial creases, and nothing at all to love.

"What brought us together," he was saying in a thin, peevish tone, "and what brought us *here* together, is our unanimous opinion that Sigmund Keyes was murdered by Victor Talbott, and also our conviction —"

"Not unanimous," another voice objected.

The voice was soft and good for the ears, and its owner was good for the eyes. Her chin, especially, was the kind you can take from any angle. The only reason I hadn't seated her in the chair nearest mine was that on her arrival she had answered my welcoming smile with nothing but brow-lifting, and I had decided to ignore her until she learned her manners.

"Not unanimous, Ferdy," she objected.

"You said," Pohl told her, even more peevish, "that you were in sympathy with our purpose and wanted to join us and come here with us."

"That," she declared, "is quite different from having the opinion that Vic murdered my father. I have no opinion, because I don't know."

"Then what are you in sympathy with?"

"I want to find out. So do you. And I certainly agree that the police are being extremely stupid."

"Who do you think killed him if Vic didn't?"

"I don't know." The brows went up again. "But since I have inherited my father's business, and since I am engaged to marry Vic, and since a few other things, I want very much to know. That's why I'm here with you."

"I say you don't belong here!" Pohl's creases were wriggling. "I said so and I still say so! We came, the four of us, for a definite purpose — to get Nero Wolfe to find proof that Vic killed your father!" Pohl suddenly leaned forward to peer at Dorothy Keyes's face, and asked in a mean little voice, "And what if you helped him?"

Three other voices spoke at once.

One said, "They're off again."

Another, "Let Mr. Broadyke tell it."

Another, "Get one of them out of here."

Wolfe said, "If the job is limited to those terms, Mr. Pohl, to prove that a man named by you committed murder, you've wasted your trip. What if he didn't?"

Many things had happened in that office, on the ground floor of the old brownstone house, owned by Nero Wolfe, on West 35th Street not far from the river, during the years I had worked for him as his man Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. The place was full of bests to hear us tell it.

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Wolfe was the best private detective in New York; Fritz Brenner was the best cook and household manager, Theodore Horstmann was the best orchid tender, and I, Archie Goodwin, was the best gadfly. So naturally it was an interesting place to be.

This gathering in the office, on this Tuesday afternoon in October, had its own special angle of interest. Sigmund Keyes, top-drawer industrial designer, had been murdered the preceding Tuesday. I had read about it in the papers, and had also heard it privately discussed by my friend and enemy, Sergeant Purley Stebbins of Homicide, and from the professional-detective slant it struck me as a lulu.

It had been Keyes's custom, five days a week at six-thirty in the morning, to take a walk in the park, and to do it the hard and silly way by walking on four legs instead of two. He kept the four legs, which he owned and which were named Casanova, at the Stillwell Riding Academy on 98th Street just west of the park.

That Tuesday morning he mounted Casanova, as usual, promptly at six-thirty and rode into the park. Forty minutes later, at seven-ten, he had been seen by a mounted cop, in the park on patrol, down around 66th Street. His customary schedule would have had him about there at that time. Twenty-five minutes later, at seven-thirty-five, Casanova, with its saddle uninhabited, had emerged from the park uptown and strolled down the street to the academy.

Curiosity had naturally been aroused, and in three-quarters of an hour had been satisfied, when a park cop had found Keyes's body behind a thicket some twenty yards from the bridle path in the park, in the latitude of 95th Street. Later, a .38 caliber revolver bullet had been dug out of his chest. The police had concluded, from marks on the path and beyond its edge, that he had been shot out of his saddle and had crawled, with difficulty, up a little slope toward a paved walk for pedestrians; and hadn't had enough life left to make it.

A horseman shot from his saddle within sight of the Empire State Building was, of course, a natural for the papers. No weapon had been found, and no eyewitness had come forward to report seeing a masked man lurking behind a tree.

So the city employees had had to start at the other end and look for motives and opportunities. During the week that had passed a lot of names had been mentioned and a lot of people had received official callers, and as a result the glare had pretty well concentrated on six spots. What gave the scene in our office that Tuesday afternoon its special angle of interest was the fact that five of the six spots were there, and apparently what they wanted Wolfe to do was to take the glare out of their eyes and get it aimed at the sixth spot, not present. . . .

"Permit me to say," Frank Broadyke offered in a cultivated baritone, "that Mr. Pohl has put it badly. The situation is this, Mr. Wolfe — that

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each of us feels that he is being harassed unreasonably. Not only that he is unjustly suspected of a crime he did not commit, but that in a full week the police have accomplished nothing and aren't likely to, and we shall be left with this unjust suspicion permanently upon us."

Broadyke gestured with a hand. More than his baritone was cultivated; he was cultivated all over. He was somewhat younger than Pohl, and ten times as elegant. His manner gave the impression that he was finding it difficult to be himself because (a) he was in the office of a private detective, which was vulgar, (b) he had come there with persons with whom one doesn't ordinarily associate, which was embarrassing, and (c) the subject for discussion was his connection with a murder, which was preposterous. He was going on:

"Mr. Pohl suggested that we consult you and engage your services. What I want is the removal of that unjust suspicion. If you can achieve that only by finding the criminal and evidence against him, very well. If the guilty man proves to be Victor Talbott, again very well."

"There's no if about it!" Pohl blurted. "Talbott did it, and the job is to pin it on him!"

"With me helping, Ferdy, don't forget," Dorothy Keyes told him softly.

"Aw, can it!"

Eyes turned to the last speaker, whose only contribution up to that point had been the remark, "They're off again." Heads had to turn, too, because he was seated to the rear of the swing of the arc. The high pitch of his voice was a good match for his name, Wayne Safford, but not for his husky build.

Wolfe nodded at him. "I quite agree, Mr. Safford." Wolfe's eyes swept the arc and he waggled his finger. "Mr. Pohl wants too much for his money. You can hire me to catch a fish, ladies and gentlemen, but you can't tell me which fish. You can tell me what it is I'm after — a murderer — but you can't tell me who it is unless you have evidence, and in that case why pay me? Have you got evidence?"

No one said anything.

"Have you got evidence, Mr. Pohl?"

"No."

"How do you know it was Mr. Talbott?"

"I know it, that's all. We all know it! Even Miss Keyes here knows it, but she's too contrary to admit it."

Wolfe swept the arc again. "Is that true? Do you all know it?"

No word.

"Then the identity of the fish is left to me. Is that understood? Mr. Broadyke?"

"Yes."

"Mr. Safford?"

"Yes."

"Miss Rooney?"

"Yes. Only I think it was Vic Talbott."

"Nothing can stop you. . . . Miss Keyes?"

"Yes."

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"Mr. Pohl?"

No answer.

"I must have a commitment on this, Mr. Pohl. If it proves to be Mr. Talbott you can pay extra. But, in any case, I am hired to get facts?"

"Sure, the real facts."

"There is no other kind. I guarantee not to deliver any unreal facts." Wolfe pressed a button on his desk. "I should make it plain that you are responsible both collectively and individually for this engagement with me. Now, if—"

The door to the hall had opened, and Fritz Brenner entered and approached.

"Fritz," Wolfe told him, "there will be five guests at dinner."

"Yes, sir," Fritz told him, without a blink, and turned to go. That's how good Fritz is, and he is not the kind to ring in omelets or canned soup. As he was opening the door a protest came from Frank Broadyke:

"Better make it four. I'll have to leave soon and I have a dinner engagement."

"Cancel it," Wolfe snapped.

"I'm afraid I can't, really."

"Then I can't take this job." Wolfe was curt. "What do you expect, with this thing already a week old?" He glanced at the clock on the wall. "I'll need all of you, certainly all evening, and probably most of the night. I must know all that you know about Mr. Keyes and Mr. Talbott. Also, if I am to remove this unjust suspicion of you from the minds of the police and the public, I must begin by removing it from my own mind. That will take hours of hard work."

"Oh," Dorothy Keyes put in, her brows going up, "you suspect us?"

Wolfe, ignoring her, asked Broadyke, "Well, sir?"

"I'll have to phone," Broadyke muttered.

"You may," Wolfe conceded as if he were yielding a point. His eyes moved, left and right and left again, and settled on Audrey Rooney, whose chair was a little in the rear, to one side of Wayne Safford's. "Miss Rooney," he shot at her, "you seem to be the most vulnerable, since you were on the scene. When did Mr. Keyes dismiss you from his employ, and what for?"

Audrey had been sitting straight and still. "Well, it was—" she began, and then didn't continue, because of an interruption.

The doorbell had rung, and I had left it to Fritz to answer it. Now the door to the hall opened, and Fritz entered, closed the door behind him, and announced: "A gentleman to see you, sir. Mr. Victor Talbott."

The name plopped in the middle of us like a paratrooper at a picnic.

"By God!" Wayne Safford exclaimed.

"How the devil—?" Frank Broadyke started, and stopped.

"So you told him!" Pohl spat at Dorothy Keyes.

Dorothy merely raised her brows. I was getting fed up with that routine and wished she would try something else.

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Audrey Rooney's eyes were like saucers.

"Show him in," Wolfe told Fritz.

Like millions of my fellow citizens, I had done some sizing up of Victor Talbott from pictures of him in the papers, and within ten seconds after he had joined us in the office I had decided the label I had tied on him could stay. He was the guy who, at a cocktail party or before dinner, grabs the tray of appetizers and passes it around, looking into eyes and making cracks. Not counting me, he was easily the best-looking male in the room.

Entering, he shot a glance and a smile at Dorothy Keyes, ignored the others, came to a stop in front of Wolfe's desk, and said pleasantly, "You're Nero Wolfe, of course. I'm Vic Talbott. I suppose you'd rather not shake hands with me under the circumstances — that is, if you're accepting the job these people came to offer you. Are you?"

"How do you do, sir?" Wolfe rumbled. "Good heavens, I've shaken hands with — how many murderers, Archie?"

"Oh — forty," I estimated.

"At least that. That's Mr. Goodwin, Mr. Talbott."

Vic gave me a nod. Then he turned to face the guests. "What about it, folks? Have you hired the great detective?" he asked.

Ferdinand Pohl had left his chair and was advancing on the gate-crasher. I was on my feet, ready to move. But all Pohl did was to tap Talbott on the chest and growl at him, "Listen, my boy. You're not going to sell anything here. You've made one sale too many as it is." Pohl whirled to Wolfe: "Why did you allow him to come in?"

"Permit me to say," Broadyke put in, "that it does seem an excess of hospitality."

"By the way, Vic." It was Dorothy's soft voice. "Ferdy says I was your accomplice."

The remarks from the others had made no visible impression on him, but it was different with Dorothy. He turned to her, and the look on his face was good for a whole chapter in his biography. He was absolutely all hers, unless I needed an oculist. He let his eyes speak to her and then wheeled to use his tongue for Pohl: "Do you know what I think of you, Ferdy?"

"If you please," Wolfe said sharply. "You don't need my office for exchanging your opinions of one another; you can do that anywhere. We have work to do. Mr. Talbott, you asked if I've accepted a job that has been offered me. I have. I have been engaged to investigate the murder of Sigmund Keyes. But I have received no confidences and can still decline it. Have you a better offer? What did you come here for?"

Talbott smiled at him. "That's the way to talk," he said admiringly. "No, I have nothing to offer in the way of a job, but I felt I ought to be in on this. I figured it this way — they were hiring you to get me arrested for murder, so, naturally, you would like to

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have a look at me and ask me some questions — and here I am."

"Pleading not guilty, of course. . . . Archie. A chair for Mr. Talbott."

"Of course," he agreed, thanking me with a smile for the chair I brought. "Otherwise you'd have no job. Shoot." Suddenly he flushed. "Under the circumstances, I guess I shouldn't have said shoot."

"You could have said fire away," Wayne Safford piped up from the rear.

"Be quiet, Wayne," Audrey Rooney scolded him.

"Permit me — " Broadyke began, but Wolfe cut him off:

"No. Mr. Talbott has invited questions." He focused on the inviter. "These other people think the police are handling this matter stupidly and ineffectively. Do you agree, Mr. Talbott?"

Vic considered a moment, then nodded. "On the whole, yes."

"Why?"

"Well — you see, they're up against it. They're used to working with clues, and while they found plenty of clues to show what happened, like the marks on the bridle path and leading to the thicket, there aren't any that help to identify the murderer. So they had to fall back on motive, and right away they found a man with the best motive in the world."

Talbott tapped himself on the necktie. "Me. But then they found that I couldn't possibly have done it, because I was somewhere else. I had an alibi that was —"

"Phony!" From Wayne Safford.

"Made to order." From Broadyke.

"The dumbheads!" From Pohl. "If they would give that switchboard girl —"

"Please!" Wolfe shut them up. "Go ahead, Mr. Talbott. Your alibi — But first, what is the best motive in the world?"

Vic looked surprised. "It's been printed over and over again."

"I know. But I don't want journalistic conjectures when I've got you — unless you're sensitive about it."

Talbott's smile had some bitterness in it. "If I was," he declared, "I've sure been cured this past week. I guess ten million people have read that I'm deeply in love with Dorothy Keyes or some variation of that. All right, I am! Want a shot — want a picture of me saying it?" He turned to face his fiancée. "I love you, Dorothy, deeply, madly, with all my heart." He returned to Wolfe: "There's your motive."

"Vic darling," Dorothy told his profile, "you're a perfect fool, and you're perfectly fascinating. I really am glad you've got a good alibi."

"You demonstrate love," Wolfe said dryly, "by killing your beloved's surviving parent. Is that it?"

"Yes," Talbott asserted. "Under certain conditions. Here was the situation: Sigmund Keyes was the most celebrated and successful industrial designer in America, and —"

"Nonsense!" Broadyke exploded, without asking permission to speak.

Talbott smiled. "Sometimes," he

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said, as if offering it for consideration, "a jealous man is worse than any jealous woman. You know, of course, that Mr. Broadyke is himself an industrial designer — in fact, he practically invented the profession. Not many manufacturers would dream of tooling for a new model — steamship, railroad train, airplane, alarm clock, no matter what — without consulting Broadyke, until I came along and took over the selling end for Sigmund Keyes. Incidentally, that's why I doubt if Broadyke killed Keyes. If he had got that desperate about it he wouldn't have killed Keyes, he would have killed me."

"You were speaking," Wolfe reminded him, "of love as a motive for murder under certain conditions."

"Yes, and Broadyke threw me off." Talbott cocked his head. "Let's see — oh, yes, and I was doing the selling for Keyes, and he couldn't stand the talk going around that I was mostly responsible for the big success we were having, but he was afraid to get rid of me. And I love his daughter and wanted her to marry me. But he had great influence with her — anyway, if she loved me as I do her that wouldn't have mattered, but she doesn't —"

"Oh, Vic," Dorothy protested, "haven't I said a dozen times I'd marry you like that" — she snapped her fingers — "if it weren't for Dad? Of course I love you!"

"All right," Talbott told Wolfe; "there's your motive. It's certainly old-fashioned, no modern-industrial design to it, but it's absolutely dependable. Naturally, that's what the police thought until they ran up against the fact that I was somewhere else. Not that they've crossed me off entirely. I understand they've got detectives and stool pigeons hunting for the gunman I hired to do the job. They'll have to hunt hard. You heard Miss Keyes call me a fool, but I'm not quite fool enough to hire someone to commit a murder for me."

"I should hope not." Wolfe sighed. "There's nothing better than a good motive. What about the alibi? Have the police given up on that?"

"Yes, the idiots!" Pohl blurted. "That switchboard girl —"

"I asked Mr. Talbott," Wolfe snapped.

"I don't know," Talbott admitted, "but I suppose they had to. I'm still trembling at how lucky I was that I got to bed late that night before Keyes was killed. If I had been riding with him I'd be in jail now, and done for. It's a question of timing.

"The mounted cop saw Keyes riding in the park near Sixty-sixth Street at ten minutes past seven. Keyes was killed near Ninety-sixth Street. Even if he had galloped all the way he couldn't have got there, the way that bridle path winds, before seven-twenty. And he didn't gallop, because, if he had, the horse would have shown it, and he didn't." Talbott twisted around. "You're the authority on that, Wayne. Casanova hadn't been in a sweat, had he?"

"You're telling it," was all he got from Wayne Safford.

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"Well, he hadn't," Talbott told Wolfe. "Wayne is on record on that. So Keyes couldn't have reached the spot where he was killed before seven-twenty-five. There's the time for that, twenty-five minutes past seven."

"And you?" Wolfe inquired.

"Me, I was lucky. I often rode in the park with Keyes at that ungodly hour — two or three times a week. He wanted me to make it every day, but I got out of it about half the time. There was nothing social or sociable about it. We would walk our horses side by side, talking business, except when he felt like trotting. I live at the Hotel Churchill. I got in late Monday night, but I left a call for six o'clock anyway, because I hadn't ridden with Keyes for several days. But when the girl rang my phone in the morning I was just too damn' sleepy, and I told her to call the riding academy and say I wouldn't be there, and to call me again at seven-thirty.

"She did so, and I still didn't feel like turning out, but I had to, because I had a breakfast date with an out-of-town customer, so I told her to send up a double orange juice. A few minutes later a waiter brought it up. Keyes was killed uptown at twenty-five past seven, at the earliest, and probably a little later. I was in my room at the Churchill, nearly three miles away, at half past seven. You can have three guesses how glad I was I left that seven-thirty call!"

Wolfe nodded. "In that armor, why did you take the trouble to join this gathering?"

"A switchboard girl and a waiter, for God's sake!" Pohl snorted sarcastically.

"Nice, honest people, Ferdy," Talbott told him; and answered Wolfe: "I didn't."

"No? You're not here?"

"Sure, I'm here, but not to join any gathering. I came to join Miss Keyes. I don't regard it as trouble to join Miss Keyes. As for the rest of them, except maybe Broadyke —"

The doorbell rang again, and since additional gate-crashers might or might not be desirable, I upped myself in a hurry, stepped into the hall, intercepted Fritz just in time, and went to the front door to take a look through the panel of one-way glass. Seeing who it was out on the stoop, I fastened the chain bolt, pulled the door open two inches, and spoke through the crack: "I don't want to catch cold."

"Neither do I," a gruff voice told me. "Take that bolt off."

"Mr. Wolfe is engaged," I said politely. "Will I do?"

"You will not. You never have and you never will."

"Then hold it a minute. I'll see."

I shut the door, went to the office, and told Wolfe, "The man about the chair," which was my favorite alias for Inspector Cramer of Homicide.

Wolfe grunted and shook his head. "I'll be busy for hours and can't be interrupted."

I returned to the front, opened to the crack again, and said regretfully, "Sorry, but he's doing his homework."

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"Yeah," Cramer said sarcastically, "he certainly is. Now that Talbott's here too you've got all six of 'em. Open the door."

"Bah. Who are you trying to impress? You have tails on one or more, possibly all, and I do hope you haven't abandoned Talbott, because we like him. By the way, the phone girl and the waiter at the Churchill — what are their names?"

"In the name of the law, open this door!"

"Well, listen to you," I said incredulously. "On me you try that? As you know, it's the law that keeps you out. If you're ready to make an arrest, tell me who, and I'll see that he or she doesn't pull a scoot. After all, you're not a monopoly. You've had them for a full week, day or night, and Wolfe has had them only an hour or so, and you can't bear it! I'll give you this much satisfaction: He hasn't solved it yet, and it may take till midnight. It will save time if you'll give me the names —"

"Shut up," Cramer rasped. "I came here perfectly friendly. There's no law against Wolfe having people in his office. And there's no law against my being there, either."

"There sure isn't," I agreed, "once you're in, but what about this door? Here's a legal door, and according to the statutes —"

"Archie!" It was a bellow from the office, Wolfe's loudest bellow, and there were other sounds. It came again: "Archie!"

I said hastily, "Excuse me," slammed the door shut, ran down the hall and popped in.

It was nothing seriously alarming. Wolfe was still in his chair behind his desk. The chair Talbott had occupied was overturned. Dorothy was on her feet, her back to Wolfe's desk, with her brows elevated to a record high. Audrey Rooney was standing in the corner by the big globe with her clenched fists pressed against her cheeks, staring. Pohl and Broadyke were also out of their chairs, also gazing at the center of the room.

From the spectators' frozen attitudes you might have expected to see something really startling, but it was only a couple of guys slinging punches. As I entered, Talbott landed a right hook on the side of Safford's neck, and as I closed the door to the hall behind me, Safford countered with a solid stiff left to Talbott's kidney sector.

"How much did I miss?" I demanded.

"Stop them!" Wolfe ordered me.

Talbott's right glanced off of Safford's cheek, and Safford got in another one over the kidney. They were operating properly and in an orderly manner, but Wolfe was the boss and he hated commotion in the office, so I stepped across, grabbed Talbott's coat collar and yanked him back so hard he fell over a chair, and faced Safford to block him. I thought Safford was going to paste me with one he had waiting, but he let it drop.

"What started it so quick?" I asked.

"He made a remark about Miss

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Rooney," Broadyke permitted himself to say.

"Get him out of here!" Wolfe spluttered.

"Which one?" I asked, watching Safford with one eye and Talbott with the other.

"Mr. Talbott!"

"You did very well, Vic," Dorothy was saying. "You were fantastically handsome with the gleam of battle in your eye." She put her palms against Talbott's cheeks, pulled his head forward, and kissed him on the lips — a quick one. "There!"

"Vic is going now," I told her. "Come on, Talbott; I'll let you out."

Before he came along he enfolded Dorothy in his arms. I glanced at Safford, expecting him to counter by enfolding Audrey, but he was standing by with his fists still doubled up. So I herded Talbott out of the room ahead of me. In the hall, while he was getting his hat and coat, I took a look through the one-way panel, saw that the stoop was clear, and opened the door. As he crossed the sill I told him: "You go for the head too much. You'll break a hand that way some day."

Back in the office, they were all seated again. Apparently, though her knight had been given the boot, Dorothy was going to stick. As I crossed to resume my place at my desk Wolfe was saying:

"We got interrupted, Miss Rooney. As I said, you seem to be the most vulnerable, since you were on the scene. Will you please move a little closer — that chair there? . . . Archie, your notebook."

At 10:55 the next morning I was sitting in the office — not still, but again — waiting for Wolfe to come down from the plant-rooms on the roof, where he keeps ten thousand orchids. His sessions up there every day are from nine to eleven in the morning and from four to six in the afternoon, and while an atomic war might change everything else, I'd like to see it change that.

I was playing three-handed pinochle with Saul Panzer and Orrie Cather, who had been phoned to come in for a job. Saul always wore an old brown cap, was under size and homely with a big nose, and was the best field man in the world for everything that could be done without a dinner jacket. Orrie, who could get along without a hairbrush in a few years, was by no means up to Saul, but was a good all-round man.

At 10:55 I was three bucks down.

In a drawer of my desk were two notebooks full. Wolfe hadn't kept the clients all night, but there hadn't been much left of it when he let them go, and we now knew a good deal more about all of them than any of the papers had printed. In some respects they were all alike, as they told it. For instance, none of them had killed Sigmund Keyes, none was heartbroken over his death, not even his daughter, none had ever owned a revolver or knew much about shooting one, none could produce any evidence that

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would help to convict Talbott or even get him arrested, none had an air-tight alibi, and each had a motive of his own which might not have been the best in the world, like Talbott's, but was nothing to sneeze at.

So they said.

Ferdinand Pohl had been indignant. He couldn't see why time should be wasted on them and theirs, since the proper and sole objective was to bust Talbott's alibi and nab him. But he came through with his facts:

Ten years previously he had furnished the hundred thousand dollars that had been needed to get Sigmund Keyes started with the style of setup suitable for a big-time industrial designer. In the past couple of years the Keyes profits had been up above the clouds, and Pohl had wanted an even split and hadn't got it. Keyes had ladled out a measly annual five per cent on Pohl's ante, five thousand a year, whereas half the profits would have been ten times that, and Pohl couldn't confront him with the classic alternative, buy my share or sell me yours, because Pohl was deep in debt.

The law wouldn't have helped, since the partnership agreement had guaranteed Pohl only the five per cent, and Keyes had given the profits an alias by taking the gravy as salary, claiming it was his designing ability that made the money. Now that Keyes was dead it would be a different story, with the contracts on hand and royalties to come for periods up to twenty years. If Pohl and Dorothy, who inherited, couldn't come to an understanding, it would be up to a judge to make the divvy, and Pohl would get, he thought, at least two hundred thousand, and probably a lot more.

He denied that that was a good motive for murder, not for him, and anyway that Tuesday morning at 7:28 he had taken a train to Larchmont to sail his boat.

Had he boarded the train at Grand Central or 125th Street? Grand Central, he said. . . . Had he been alone? Yes. He had left his apartment on East 84th Street at seven o'clock and taken the subway. . . . Did he often ride the subway? Yes. . . . And so on, for fourteen pages of a notebook. . . . I gave him a D minus, even granting that he could cinch it that he reached Larchmont on that train, since it would have stopped at 125th Street at 7:38, ten minutes after it left Grand Central.

With Dorothy Keyes the big question was how much of the Keyes profits had been coming her way. Part of the time she seemed to have the idea that her father had been fairly liberal with the dough, and then she would indicate that he had been as tight-fisted as a baby hanging on to another baby's toy.

The conclusion I reached was that her take had averaged somewhere between twenty and five hundred thousand a year, which was a wide gap. The point was, which way was she sitting prettier, with her father alive and making plenty of dough and shelling it out, or with him dead and every-

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thing hers after Pohl had been attended to? She saw the point, all right, and I must say it didn't seem to shock her much.

If it was an act, it was good. Instead of standing on the broad, moral principle that daughters do not kill fathers, her fundamental position was that at the unspeakable hour in question, half past seven in the morning, she couldn't even have been killing a fly, let alone her father. She was never out of bed before eleven, except in emergencies, as, for instance, the Tuesday morning under discussion, when word had come some time between nine and ten that her father was dead.

She had lived with her father in an apartment on Central Park South. . . . Servants? Two maids. . . . Wolfe put it to her: Would it have been possible, before seven in the morning, for her to leave the apartment and the building, and later get back in again, without being seen? Not, she declared, unless someone had turned a hose on her to wake her up; that accomplished, possibly the rest could be managed, but she really couldn't say because she had never tried.

I gave her no mark at all, because by that time I was prejudiced and couldn't trust my judgment.

Frank Broadyke was a wow. He had enthusiastically adopted Talbott's suggestion that if he, Broadyke, had undertaken to kill anyone it would have been Talbott and not Keyes, since it implied that Keyes's eminence in his profession had been on account of Talbott's salesmanship instead of Keyes's ability as a designer.

He admitted that the steady decrease in his own volume of business had been coincident with the rise of Keyes's, and he further admitted, when the matter was mentioned by Dorothy, that only three days before the murder, Keyes had started an action at law against him for damages to the tune of $100,000, complaining that he had stolen designs from Keyes's office which had got him contracts for a concrete mixer and an electric washing machine.

But what the hell? he maintained. The man he would naturally have it in for was Vic Talbott, who had stampeded the market with his high-pressure sales methods.

He had been doing his best to recover lost ground. All his brilliant early successes, he said, had been conceived before the dew was dry in shady places. In the afternoon and evening he was no better than a clod. But eventually he had got lazy and careless, stayed up late and got up late, and it was then that his star had begun to dim.

Recently, quite recently, he had determined to light the flame again, and only a month ago he had started getting to his office before seven o'clock, three hours before the staff was due to arrive. To his satisfaction and delight, it was beginning to work. The flashes of inspiration were coming back. That very Tuesday morning, the morning Keyes was killed, he had greeted his staff, when they arrived,

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by showing them a revolutionary design for an electric egg beater.

Had anyone, Wolfe wanted to know, been with him in his office that morning during the parturition, say from half past six to eight o'clock? . . . No. No one.

For alibi, Broadyke, of those three, came closest to being naked.

Since I had cottoned to Audrey Rooney it was a setback to learn that her parents in Vermont had named her Annie, and she had changed it herself. Okay if she hadn't cared for Annie with Rooney, but why Audrey? It showed a lack in her.

It did not, of course, indict her for murder, but her tale helped out on that. She had worked in the Keyes office as Victor Talbott's secretary, and a month ago Keyes had fired her because he suspected her of swiping designs and selling them to Broadyke.

When she had demanded proof and Keyes hadn't been able to produce it, she had proceeded to raise the roof.

She had forced her way into his private room at the office so often that he had been compelled to hire a husky to keep her out. She had tried to get at him at home but had failed. Eight days before his death, on a Monday morning, he had found her waiting for him when he arrived at the Stillwell Riding Academy to get his four legs. With the help of the stable hand, by name Wayne Safford, he had managed to mount and clatter off for the park.

But next morning Annie Audrey was there again, and the next one, too. What was biting her hardest, as she explained to Wolfe at the outset, was that Keyes had refused to listen to her. She thought he should. She didn't say in so many words that another reason she kept on showing up at the academy was that the stable hand didn't seem to mind, but that could be gathered.

The fourth morning, Thursday, Vic Talbott had arrived too, to accompany Keyes on his ride. Keyes, pestered by Audrey, had poked her with his crop; Wayne Safford had pushed Keyes hard enough to make him fall; Talbott had taken a swing at Wayne; and Wayne had socked Talbott and knocked him into a stall that hadn't been cleaned.

Evidently, I thought, Wayne held back when he was boxing in a nicely furnished office on a Kerman rug; and I also thought that if I had been Keyes I would have tried designing an electric horse for my personal use. But on Friday he was back for more, and did get more comments from Audrey, and on Monday, it was the same. Talbott wasn't there either that day or the next.

Tuesday morning Audrey got there at a quarter to six, so that she could make coffee while Wayne curried horses. They ate cinnamon rolls with the coffee. Wolfe frowned at that, because he hates cinnamon rolls. A little after six a phone call came from the Hotel Churchill not to saddle Talbott's horse and to tell Keyes he wouldn't be there. At six-thirty Keyes arrived, on the dot as usual, re-

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sponded only with grimly tightened lips to Audrey's needling, and rode off. Audrey stayed on at the academy, was there continuously for another hour, and was still there at twenty-five minutes to eight, when Keyes's horse came wandering in under an empty saddle.

Was Wayne also there continuously? Yes, they were together all the time.

When it came Wayne's turn he didn't contradict her on a single point, which I thought was very civilized behavior for a stable hand.

When they had gone, more than two hours after midnight, I yawned, and told Wolfe: "Five mighty fine clients. Huh?"

He grunted in disgust.

"I could sleep on it more productively," I stated, "if you would point. Not at Talbott — I don't need that. I'm a better judge of love looks than you are, and I saw him looking at Dorothy, and he has it bad. But the clients? Pohl?"

"He needs money, perhaps desperately, and now he'll get it."

"Broadyke?"

"His vanity was mortally wounded, his business was going downhill, and he was being sued for a large sum."

"Dorothy?"

"A daughter. A woman. It could have gone back to her infancy, or it could have been a trinket denied her today."

"Safford?"

"A primitive romantic. Within three days after he met that girl the fool was eating cinnamon rolls with her at six o'clock in the morning. What about his love look?"

I nodded. "Giddy."

"And he saw Mr. Keyes strike the girl with his riding crop."

"Not strike her, poke her."

"Even worse, because more contemptuous. Also, the girl had persuaded him that Mr. Keyes was persisting in a serious injustice to her."

"Okay. How about her?"

"A woman either being wronged or caught wronging another. In either case, unhinged."

He got to his feet. "I'm sleepy." He started for the door.

Following, I told his back, "I know one thing, I would collect from every damn' one of them in advance. I can't imagine why Cramer wanted to see them again, even Talbott, after a whole week with them. He's sore as a pup. Shall we phone him?"

"No." We were in the hall. Wolfe, heading for the elevator to ascend to his room on the third floor, turned. "What did he want?"

"He didn't say, but I can guess. He's at a dead stop in the middle of a six corners, and he came to see if you've got a road map."

I made for the stairs, since the elevator is only four by six, and with all of Wolfe inside it would already be cramped.

"Forty trump," Orrie Cather said at 10:55 Wednesday morning.

I had told them the Keyes case had knocked on our door and we had five suspects for clients, and that was all.

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Wolfe had not seen fit to tell me what their errands would be, so I was entertaining at cards instead of summarizing the notebooks for them. At eleven sharp we ended the game, and a few minutes later the door from the hall opened and Wolfe entered.

He got himself installed behind his desk, rang for beer, and asked me, "You've explained things to Saul and Orrie, of course?"

"Certainly not. For all I knew, it's classified."

He grunted and told me to get Inspector Cramer. I dialed the number and finally had Cramer and signaled to Wolfe, and, since I got no sign to keep off, I stayed on.

"Mr. Cramer? Nero Wolfe."

"Yeah. What do you want?"

"I'm sorry I was busy last evening. It's always a pleasure to see you. I've been engaged in the matter of Mr. Keyes's death, and it will be to our mutual interest for you to let me have a little routine information."

"Like what?"

"To begin with, the name and number of the mounted policeman who saw Mr. Keyes in the park at ten minutes past seven that morning. I want to send Archie —"

At that point Mr. Cramer hung up.

Wolfe put down the phone and reached for the beer tray which Fritz had brought in, and told me, "Get Mr. Skinner of the District Attorney's office."

I did so, and Wolfe got on again. In the past, Skinner had had his share of moments of irritation with Wolfe, but at least he hadn't had the door slammed in his face the preceding evening, and therefore was not boorish. Upon Wolfe's assurance that he would keep Skinner posted on developments at his end, which they both knew was a bare-faced lie, the Assistant D. A. offered to ask headquarters to arrange for me to see the cop. And did so. Ten minutes after Wolfe and he were finished, a call came from Centre Street to tell me that Officer Hefferan would meet me at 11:45 at the corner of 66th Street and Central Park West.

During the less than ten minutes Wolfe had drunk beer, asked Saul about his family, and told me what I was expected to find out from the cop. That made me sore, but even more it made me curious. When we're on a case it sometimes happens that Wolfe gets the notion that I have got involved on some angle or with some member of the cast, and that therefore it is necessary to switch me temporarily onto a siding. I had about given up wasting nervous energy resenting it. But what was it this time? I had bought nobody's version and was absolutely fancy-free, so why should he send me out to chew the rag with a cop and keep Saul and Orrie for more important errands? I was glaring at him when the phone rang again.

It was Ferdinand Pohl, asking for Wolfe.

"I'm at the Keyes office," Pohl said. "Forty-seventh and Madison. Can you come up here right away?"

"Certainly not," Wolfe said in an

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aggrieved tone. It always riled him that anybody in the world didn't know that he never left his house on business, and rarely for anything whatever. "I work only at home. What's the matter?"

"There's someone here I want you to talk to. Two members of the staff. With their testimony I can prove that Talbott took those designs and sold them to Broadyke. This clinches it that it was Talbott who killed Keyes. Of us five, the only ones that could possibly be suspected were Miss Rooney and that stable hand, with that mutual alibi they had, and this clears them, of course."

"Nonsense. It does nothing of the sort. It proves that she was unjustly accused of theft, and an unjust accusation rankles more than a just one. Now you can have Mr. Talbott charged with larceny, at least. I'm extremely busy. Thank you for calling."

Pohl wanted to prolong it, but Wolfe got rid of him, drank more beer, and turned to me: "You're expected there in twenty minutes, Archie, and considering your tendency to get arrested for speeding —"

I had had one ticket for speeding in eight years. I walked to the door, but turned to remark bitterly, "If you think you're just sending me out to play, 'try again.' Who was the last to see Keyes alive? The cop. He did it. And who will I deliver him to? You? No. Inspector Cramer!"

It was sunny and warm for October, and the drive uptown would have been pleasant if I hadn't been prejudiced by my feeling that I was being imposed on. Parking on 65th Street, I walked around the corner and up a block, and crossed Central Park West to where a man in uniform was monkeying with his horse's bridle.

I showed credentials and said it was nice of him, busy as he was, to give me his time.

"Oh," he said, "one of our prominent kidders, huh?"

I made for cover. "About as prominent," I declared, "as a fish egg in a bowl of caviar."

"Oh, you eat caviar."

"Wait a minute," I muttered: "let's start over again." I walked four paces to a lamppost, wheeled, returned to him, and announced, "My name's Goodwin and I work for Nero Wolfe. Headquarters said I could ask you a couple of questions, and I'd appreciate it."

"Uh-huh. A friend of mine in the Fifteenth Squad has told me about you. You nearly got him sent to the marshes."

"Then you were already prejudiced. So was I, but not against you. Not even against your horse. Speaking of horses, that morning you saw Keyes on his horse, not long before he was killed, what time was it?"

"Ten minutes past seven."

"Within a minute or two?"

"Not within anything. Ten minutes past seven. I was on the early shift then, due to check out at eight. As you say, I'm so busy that I have no time, so I was hanging around expect-

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ing to see Keyes go by as per schedule. I like to see his horse — a light chestnut with a fine spring to him."

"How did the horse look that morning, same as usual? Happy and healthy?" Seeing the look on his face, I added hastily, "I actually want to know, was it his horse?"

"Certainly it was! Maybe you don't know horses. I do."

"Okay. I used to, too, when I was a boy on a farm in Ohio, but we haven't corresponded lately. What about Keyes that morning — did he look mad or glad or what?"

"He looked as usual."

"Did you speak to each other?"

"No."

"How close were you to him?"

"Two hundred and seventy feet. I've paced it."

"Would you mind showing me the spot? Where he was and where you were?"

"Yes, I'd mind, but I've got orders."

The courteous thing would have been for him to lead his horse and walk with me, so he didn't do that. He mounted his big bay and rode into the park, with me tagging along behind; and not only that, he must have given it a private signal that they mustn't be late. I never saw a horse walk so fast. I gave my legs the best stretch they had had in several years, and I wasn't more than thirty paces in the rear when he finally came to a stop at the crest of a little knoll. There were a lot of trees, big and little, off to the right down the slope, and clumps of bushes were on the left, but in between there was a good view of a long stretch of the bridle path. It was almost at a right angle to our line of vision, and at its nearest looked about a hundred yards away.

He did not dismount. There is no easier way in the world to feel superior to a man than to talk to him from on top of a horse. Speaking, I handled things so as not to seem out of breath.

"You were here?"

"Right here."

"And he was going north."

"Yep."

"You saw him. Did he see you?"

"Yes. He lifted his crop to me and I waved back. We often did that."

"But he didn't stop or gaze straight at you."

"He didn't gaze straight or crooked. He was out for a ride. Listen, brother." The mounted man's tone indicated that he had decided to humor me and get it over. "I've been through all this with the Homicide boys. If you're asking was it Keyes, it was. It was his horse. It was his bright yellow breeches, the only ones of that color around, and his blue jacket and his black derby. It was the way he sat, with his stirrups too long. It was Keyes."

"Good. May I pat your horse?"

"No."

"Then I won't. It would suit me fine if the occasion arose some day for me to pat you. When I'm dining with the inspector this evening I'll put in a word for you, not saying what kind."

I hoofed it out of the park to Broad-

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way, found a drugstore and a phone booth, and dialed my favorite number. It was Orrie Cather's voice that answered. "So," I remarked to myself, "he's still there, probably sitting at my desk; Wolfe's instructions for him must be awful complicated." I asked for Wolfe, and got him.

"Yes, Archie?"

"I am phoning as instructed. Officer Hefferan is a Goodwin hater, but I swallowed my pride. On the stand he would swear up and down that he saw Keyes at the place and time as given, and I guess he did, but a good lawyer could shoot it full of ifs and buts."

"Why? Is Mr. Hefferan a shuttlecock?"

"By no means. He knows it all. But it wasn't a close-up."

"You'd better let me have it verbatim."

I did so.

When I had finished, Wolfe said, "Mr. Pohl has telephoned again, twice, from the Keyes office. He's a jackass. Go there and see him. The address —"

"I know the address. What part of him do I look at?"

"Tell him to stop telephoning me."

"Right. I'll cut the wires. Then what do I do?"

"Phone in again, and we'll see."

One quick look around the Keyes establishment on the 12th floor was enough to show where a good slice of the profits had gone, unless that was what Pohl's hundred grand had been used for. Panels of four kinds of blond wood made up both the walls and ceiling, and the furniture matched.

When a woman with pink earrings learned that I sought Mr. Pohl she gave me a wary and reproachful look, but she functioned. After a little delay I was waved through a door and found myself at the end of a long, wide corridor. I had been given no directions, so the best opening move seemed to be to walk down the corridor, so I started, glancing into open doors on either side as I passed. At the fourth door on the right I saw him, and he called to me, simultaneously.

"Come in, Goodwin!" he said.

I entered. It was a big room and appeared to be the spot where they had really decided to spread themselves. The rugs were white and the walls were black, and the enormous desk that took all of one end was either ebony or call in an expert. The chair behind the desk, in which Pohl was seated, was likewise.

"Where's Wolfe?" Pohl demanded.

"Where he always is," I replied, *negotiating rugs.* "At *home sitting* down."

He was scowling at me. "I thought he was with you. When I phoned him a few minutes ago he intimated that he might be. He's not coming?"

"No. Never. I'm glad you phoned him again because, as he told you this morning in my hearing, he'll need the cooperation of all of you."

"He'll get mine," Pohl stated grimly. "Since he's not coming for it himself, I suppose I ought to give this to you." He took a paper from his

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breast pocket, and held it out. I stepped to the desk to take it from him.

It was a single sheet, with "Memo from Sigmund Keyes" on it printed fancy, and scrawled in ink was a list of towns:

Dayton, Ohio Aug. 11 & 12
Boston Aug. 21
Los Angeles Aug. 27 to Sept. 5
Meadville, Pa. Sept. 15
Pittsburgh Sept. 16 & 17
Chicago Sept. 24–26
Philadelphia Oct. 1

"Much obliged," I thanked him, and stuck it in my pocket. "Covers a lot of country."

Pohl nodded. "Talbott gets around, and he's a good salesman, I admit that. Tell Wolfe I did just as he said, and I got it out of a record right here in Keyes's desk, so no one knows anything about it. Those are all the out-of-town trips Talbott has made since August first. I have no idea what Wolfe wants it for, but who does know what a detective is after?"

I had an eye cocked at him, trying to decide whether he was really as naïve as he sounded. It gave me one on Wolfe, knowing that he had tried to keep Pohl away from a phone by giving him work to do, and here Pohl had cleaned it up in no time and was ready to ask for more. But instead of asking Wolfe, Pohl asked me.

"Go out and get me some sandwiches and coffee. There's a place on Forty-sixth Street, Perrine's."

I sat down. "That's funny; I was about to ask you to get me some. I'm tired and hungry. Let's go together."

"How can I?" he demanded.

"Why not?"

"Because I might not be able to get in again. This is Keyes's room, but Keyes is dead, and I own part of this business and I've got a right here! Dorothy has tried to chase me out. I want certain information, and she has ordered the staff not to give me any. She threatened to get the police to put me out, but she won't do that. She's had enough of the police this last week." Pohl was scowling at me. "I prefer corned beef, and the coffee black, no sugar."

I grinned at his scowl. "So you're squatting. Where's Dorothy?"

"Down the hall, in Talbott's room."

"Is Talbott there?"

"No, he hasn't been in today."

I glanced at my wrist and saw twenty minutes past one. I stood up. "Rye with mustard?"

"No. White bread and nothing on it — no butter."

"Okay. On one condition, that you promise not to phone Mr. Wolfe."

He said he wouldn't, and that he wanted two sandwiches and plenty of coffee, and I departed. I went out to the elevators, descended, and got directed to a phone booth in the lobby.

Orrie Cather answered again, and I began to suspect that he and Saul were continuing the pinochle game with Wolfe.

"I'm on my way," I told Wolfe when he was on, "to get corned beef

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sandwiches for Pohl and me, but I've got a plan. He promised not to phone you while I'm gone, and if I don't go back he's stuck. He has installed himself in Keyes's room, which you ought to see, against Dorothy's protests, and intends to stay. Been there all day. What shall I do, come home or go to a movie?"

"Has Mr. Pohl had lunch?"

"Certainly not. That's what the sandwiches are for."

"Then you'll have to take them to him."

"All right," I conceded, "and I may get a tip. By the way, that trick you tried didn't work. Right away he found a record of Talbott's travels in Keyes's desk, and copied it off on a sheet from Keyes's memo pad. I've got it in my pocket."

"Read it to me."

"Oh, you can't wait." I got the paper out and read the list of towns and dates to him.

When that farce was over I asked, "After I feed him, then what?"

"Call in again when you've had your lunch."

I banged the thing on the hook.

They were good sandwiches. The beef was tender and the bread had some character. I was a little short on milk, having got only a pint, but stretched it out. In between bites we discussed matters, and I made a mistake. I should, of course, have told Pohl nothing whatever, especially since the more I saw of him the less I liked him, but I got careless and let it out that as far as I knew no attack had been made on the phone girl and the waiter at the Hotel Churchill.

Pohl was determined to phone Wolfe immediately to utter a howl, and in order to stop him I had to tell him that Wolfe had other men on the case and I didn't know whom or what they were covering.

I was about to phone, myself, when Dorothy Keyes and Victor Talbott walked in.

I stood up. Pohl didn't.

"Hello," I said cheerfully. "Nice place you have here."

Neither of them even nodded to me. Dorothy dropped into a chair against a wall, and turned her gaze on Pohl with her chin in the air. Talbott marched over to us at the ebony desk, and told Pohl:

"You know damn' well you've got no right here, going through things and ordering the staff around. You have no right here at all. I'll give you one minute to get out."

"*You'll* give me?" Pohl sounded nasty and looked nasty. "You're a paid employee, and you won't be that long, and I'm part owner, and you say *you'll* give me! Trying to order the staff around, am I? I'm giving the staff a chance to tell the truth, and two of them are in a lawyer's office, getting it on paper. A complaint has been sworn against Broadyke for receiving stolen goods, and he's been arrested by now."

Talbott said, "Get out."

Pohl, not moving, said, "And I might also mention that a complaint has been sworn against you for steal-

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ing the goods. The designs you sold to Broadyke."

Talbott's teeth stayed together as he said, "You can leave now."

"Or I can stay. I'll stay." Pohl was sneering, and it made his face creases deeper. "You may have noticed I'm not alone."

I didn't care for that. "Just a minute," I put in. "I'll hold your coats, and that's all. Don't count on me, Mr. Pohl. I'm strictly a spectator, except for one thing — you haven't paid me for your lunch. Ninety-five cents before you go, if you're going."

"I'm not going. It's different here from what it was in the park that morning, Vic. There's a witness."

Talbott took two quick steps, used a foot to shove the big ebony chair back free of the desk, made a grab in the neighborhood of Pohl's throat, got his necktie, and jerked him out of the chair. Pohl came forward and tried to come up at the same time, but Talbott, moving fast, kept going with him, dragging him around the corner of the desk.

Suddenly, Talbott went down, flat on his back, an upflung hand gripping a piece of the necktie. Pohl was not very springy, even for his age, but he did his best. He scrambled to his feet, started yelling, "Help! Police! Help!" at the top of his voice, and seized the chair I had been sitting on and raised it high. His idea was to drop it on the prostrate enemy, and my leg muscles tightened for quick action, but Talbott leaped up and yanked the chair away from him.

Pohl, yelling for help again, galloped across the room to a table which held various objects, picked up an electric iron, and threw it. Missing Talbott, who dodged, it crashed onto the ebony desk and knocked the telephone to the floor. Apparently, having an iron thrown at him made Talbott mad, for when he reached Pohl, instead of trying to get a hold on something more substantial than a necktie, he hauled off and landed on his jaw, in spite of the warning I had given him the day before.

"Off of that, you!" a voice boomed.

Glancing to the right, I saw two things: first, that Dorothy, still in her chair, hadn't even uncrossed her legs, and, second, that the law who had entered was a squad dick I knew by sight but hadn't known was around.

He crossed to the gladiators. "This is no way to act," he declared.

Dorothy was beside him. "This man," she said, indicating Pohl, "was told to leave but wouldn't. I am in charge of this place and he has no right here. I want a charge against him for trespassing or disturbing the peace or whatever it is. He tried to kill Mr. Talbott with a chair, and then with that iron he threw at him."

I, having put the phone back on the desk, had wandered near, and the law gave me a look. "What were you doing, Goodwin, trimming your nails?"

"No, sir," I said respectfully, "it was just that I didn't want to get stepped on."

Talbott and Pohl were both speaking at once.

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"I know, I know," the dick said, harassed. "Ordinarily, with people like you, I would feel that the thing to do was to sit down and discuss it, but with what happened to Keyes, things are different from ordinary." He appealed to Dorothy: "You say you're making a charge, Miss Keyes?"

"I certainly am."

"Then that's that. Come along with me, Mr. Pohl."

"I'm staying here." Pohl was still panting. "I have a right here and I'm staying here."

"No, you're not. You heard what the lady said."

"Yes, but you didn't hear what I said. I was assaulted. She makes a charge. So do I. I was sitting quietly in a chair, not moving, and Talbott tried to strangle me, and he struck me. Didn't you see him strike me?"

"It was in self-defense," Dorothy declared. "You threw an iron —"

"To save my life! He assaulted —"

"Hold it," the law said curtly. "You men will come along with me, both of you."

They went. First they used up more breath on words and gestures, but they went.

Thinking I might as well tidy up a little, I went and righted the chair Pohl had tried to use, then retrieved the iron and put it back on the table.

"I suppose you're a coward, aren't you?" Dorothy inquired.

She had sat down again.

"It's controversial," I told her. "It was on the Town Meeting of the Air last week. With a midget, if he's unarmed, I'm as brave as a lion. Or with a woman. Try picking on me. But with —"

A buzz sounded.

"The phone," Dorothy said.

I pulled it to me and got the receiver to my ear.

"Is Miss Keyes there?"

"Yes," I said, "she's busy sitting down. Any message?"

"Tell her Mr. Donaldson is here to see her."

I did so, and for the first time saw an expression that was unquestionably human on Dorothy's face. At the sound of the name Donaldson all trace of the brow lifter vanished. Muscles tightened all over and color went. She may or may not have been what she had just called me — I didn't know because I had never seen or heard of Donaldson — but she sure was scared.

I got tired waiting and repeated it: "Mr. Donaldson is here to see you."

"I —" She wet her lips. In a moment she swallowed. In another moment she stood up, said in a voice not soft at all, "Tell her to send him to Mr. Talbott's room," and went.

I forwarded the command, asked for an outside line, and dialed the number. My wrist watch said five past three, and it stopped my tongue for a second when once more I heard Orrie's voice.

"Archie," I said shortly. "Let me speak to Saul."

"Saul? He's not here. Been gone for hours."

"Oh, I thought it was a party. Then Wolfe."

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Wolfe's voice came: "Yes, Archie?"

"I'm in Keyes's office, sitting at his desk. I'm alone. They're scooping up all the clients. Broadyke has been collared for receiving stolen goods — the designs he bought from Talbott. Pohl has been pulled in for disturbing the peace, and Talbott for assault and battery. Not to mention that Miss Keyes has just had the daylights scared out of her."

"What are you talking about? What happened?"

I told him and, since he had nothing to do but sit and let Orrie answer the phone for him, I left nothing out. When I was through I offered the suggestion that it might be a good plan for me to find out what it was about Mr. Donaldson that made young women turn pale at sound of his name.

"No, I think not," Wolfe said, "unless he's a tailor. Just find out if he's a tailor, but discreetly. No disclosure. If so, get his address. Then find Miss Rooney. Get her confidence. Loosen up her tongue."

"What am I after —? No, I know what I'm after. What are you after?"

"I don't know. Anything you can get. Confound it, you know what a case like this amounts to; there's nothing for it but trial and error."

Movement over by the door had caught my eye and I focused on it. Someone had entered and was approaching me.

"Okay," I told Wolfe. "There's no telling where she is, but I'll find her if it takes all day and all night."

I hung up and greeted the newcomer: "Hello, Miss Rooney. Looking for me?"

Annie Rooney was all dressed up in a neat wool dress, but she didn't look pleased with herself or with anyone else. You wouldn't think a face with all that pink skin could look so sour. She demanded, "How do you get to see a man that's been arrested?"

"That depends," I told her. "Don't snap at me like that; I didn't arrest him. Who do you want to see, Broadyke?"

"No." She dropped onto a chair as if she needed support quick. "Wayne Safford."

"Arrested what for?"

"I don't know. A while ago I phoned Lucy, my best friend here, and she told me there was talk about Vic Talbott selling those designs to Broadyke, so I came to find out what was happening, and when I learned that Talbott and Pohl had both been arrested I phoned Wayne to tell him about it, and the man there answered and said a policeman had come and taken Wayne with him."

"For why?"

"The man didn't know. So I wanted to phone you at your office and was told you were here. How do I get to see him?"

"You probably don't."

"But I have to!"

I shook my head. "You believe you have to, and I believe you have to, but the cops won't. It depends on what his invitation said. If they just want to consult him about sweating

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horses he may be home in an hour. If they've got a hook in him, God knows. You're not a lawyer or a relative."

She sat and looked at me, sourer than ever. Then she got up, circled two corners of the desk to reach the phone, and in a moment told the transmitter: "This is Audrey, Helen. Would you get me — No. Forget it."

She hung up, perched on a corner of the desk, and started giving me the chilly eye again.

"It's me," she declared.

"What is?"

"This trouble. Wherever I am there's trouble."

"Yeah, the world's full of it. Wherever anybody is there's trouble. You get shaky ideas. Yesterday you were scared because you thought they were getting set to hang a murder on you, and not one of them has hinted at it. Maybe you're wrong again."

"No, I'm not." She sounded grim. "There was that business of accusing me of stealing those designs. They didn't have to pick me for that, but you notice they did. Now all of a sudden that's cleared up, I'm out of that, and what happens? Wayne gets arrested for murder. Next thing —"

"I thought you didn't know what they took him for."

"I don't. But you'll see. He was with me, wasn't he?" She slid off the desk and was erect. "I think — I'm pretty sure — I'm going to see Dorothy Keyes."

"She's busy with a caller."

"I know it, but he may be gone."

"A man named Donaldson, and I'm wondering about him. I have a hunch Miss Keyes is starting a little investigation on her own. Do you happen to know if this Donaldson is a detective?"

"I know he isn't. He's a lawyer and a friend of Mr. Keyes. I've seen him here several times. Do you —?"

What interrupted her was a man coming in the door and heading for us. It was a man I had known for years.

"We're busy," I told him brusquely.

I should have had sense enough to give up kidding Sergeant Purley Stebbins of the Homicide Squad long ago, since it always glanced off.

"So you're here," he stated.

"Yep. . . . Miss Rooney, this is Sergeant —"

"Oh, I've met him before."

"Yeah, we've met," Purley acquiesced. "I've been looking for you, Miss Rooney."

"Oh, my lord, more questions?"

"The same ones. Just checking up. You remember that statement you signed, where you said that Tuesday morning you were at the riding academy with Safford from a quarter to six until after half past seven, and both of you were there all the time?"

"Certainly I do."

"Do you want to change it now?"

"Of course not. Why should I?"

"Then how do you account for the fact that you were seen riding a horse into the park during that period, and Safford, on another horse, was with you, and Safford has admitted it?"

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"Count ten," I snapped at her, "before you answer. Or even a hun —"

"Shut up," Purley snarled. "How do you account for it, Miss Rooney?"

Audrey had left her perch on the desk to get on her feet and face the pursuer. "Maybe," she suggested, "someone couldn't see straight. Who says he saw us?"

"Okay." Purley hauled a paper from his pocket and unfolded it. He looked at me. "We're careful about these little details when that fat boss of yours has got his nose in." He held the paper so Audrey could see it. "This is a warrant for your arrest as a material witness. Your friend Safford wanted to read his clear through. Do you?"

She ignored his generous offer. "What does it mean?" she demanded.

"It means you're going to ride downtown with me."

"It also means —" I began.

"Shut up." Purley moved a step. His hand started for her elbow, but didn't reach it, for she was on her way. He followed, and was at her heels as she went out the door. Apparently she thought she had found a way to get to see her Wayne.

I shook my head at nothing in particular, just the state of things, reached for the phone, got an outside line, and dialed again.

Wolfe's voice answered.

"Where's Orrie?" I demanded. "Taking a nap on my bed?"

"Where are you?" Wolfe inquired.

"Still in Keyes's office. More of the same. Two more gone."

"Two more what? Where?"

"Clients. In the hoosegow. We're getting awful low —"

"Who and why?"

"Wayne Safford and Audrey Rooney." I told him what had happened, without bothering to explain that Audrey had walked in before our previous conversation had ended. Then I added, "So four out of five have been snaffled, and Talbott, too. We're in a fine fix. That leaves us with just one — Dorothy Keyes — and it wouldn't surprise me if she was also on her way, judging from the look on her face when she heard who was — Hold it a minute."

What stopped me was the sight of another visitor entering the room. It was Dorothy Keyes. I told the phone, "I'll call back," hung up, and left my chair.

Dorothy came to me. She was still human, more so if anything. The perky lift of her was completely gone, the color scheme of her visible skin was washed-out gray, and her eyes were pinched with trouble.

"Mr. Donaldson gone?" I asked her.

"Yes."

"It's a bad day all around. Now Miss Rooney and Safford have been pinched. The police think they left out something about that Tuesday morning. I was just telling Mr. Wolfe when you came —"

"I want to see him," she said.

"You can't, not at once," I told her. "You could rush there in a taxi, but you might as well wait till I go to

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Sixty-fifth Street and get my car, because it's after four o'clock and he's up with the orchids, and he wouldn't see you until six even though you are the only client he's got still out of jail."

"But this is urgent!"

"Not for him it isn't, not until six o'clock. Unless you want to tell me about it — I'm permitted upstairs. Do you?"

"No."

"Then shall I go get my car?"

"Yes."

I went.

At three minutes past six, Wolfe, down from the plant-rooms, joined us in the office. By the time Dorothy and I had got there she had made it perfectly plain that as far as I was concerned she was all talked out. And when Wolfe had entered and greeted her, and got his bulk adjusted in his chair behind his desk, the first thing she said was:

"I want to speak to you privately."

Wolfe shook his head. "Mr. Goodwin is my confidential assistant, and if he didn't hear it from you he soon would from me. What is it?"

"There is no one I can go to but you." Dorothy was in one of the yellow chairs, facing him, leaning forward to him. "I don't know where I stand, and I've got to find out. A man is going to tell the police that I forged my father's name to a check."

"Did you?" Wolfe asked.

"Forge the check? Yes."

"Tell me about it," Wolfe said.

It came out, and was really quite simple. Her father hadn't given her enough money for the style to which she wanted to accustom herself. A year ago she had forged a check for $3,000 and he had, of course, discovered it, and had received her promise that she would never repeat. Recently she had forged another one, this time for $5,000, and her father had been very difficult about it, but there had been no thought in his head of having his daughter arrested.

Two days after his discovery of this second offense he had been killed. He had left everything to his daughter, but had made a lawyer named Donaldson executor of the estate, not knowing, according to Dorothy, that Donaldson hated her. And now Donaldson had found the forged check among Keyes's papers, with a memorandum attached to it in Keyes's handwriting, and had called on Dorothy that afternoon to tell her that it was his duty, both as a citizen and as a lawyer, to give the facts to the police.

Wolfe, having got answers to all the questions that had occurred to him, leaned back and heaved a sigh. "I can understand," he murmured, "that you felt impelled to get rid of this nettle by passing it on to someone. But even if I grasped it for you, what then?"

"I don't know." Dorothy sounded as forlorn as she looked.

"Moreover," Wolfe went on, "what are you afraid of? The property, including the bank balance, now belongs to you. It would be a waste of time and money for the District Attorney's

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office to try to get you indicted and brought to trial, and it wouldn't even be considered. Unless Mr. Donaldson is an idiot he knows that. Tell him so. Tell him I say he's a nincompoop." Wolfe wiggled a finger at her. "Unless he thinks you killed your father and wants to help get you electrocuted. Does he hate you that much?"

"He hates me," Dorothy said harshly, "all he can."

"Why?"

"Because once I let him think I might marry him, and then I changed my mind. He has strong feelings. They were strong when he loved me, and are just as strong now when he hates me. Any way he can use that check to hurt me, he'll do it."

"Then you can't stop him, and neither can I. The forged check and your father's memorandum are legally in his possession, and nothing can keep him from showing them to the police."

"That's fine!" Dorothy said hopelessly. She stood up. "I thought you were clever!" She made for the door, but at the sill she turned. "You're just a cheap shyster, too! I'll handle the dirty little rat myself!"

I got up and went to the hall to let her out, to make sure that the door was properly closed behind her. When I got back to the office I sat down and tossed the notebook into a drawer, and remarked, "Now she's got us all tagged. I'm a coward, you're a shyster, and the executor of her father's estate is a rat. She needs some fresh contacts."

Wolfe merely grunted, but it was a good-humored grunt, for the dinner hour was near and he never permits himself to get irritated before a meal.

"So," I said, "unless she does some fancy handling in a hurry she will be gathered in before noon tomorrow, and she was the last we had. I hope Saul and Orrie are doing better than we are. I have a date for dinner and a show with a friend, but I can break it if there's anything I can be doing —"

"There's nothing for this evening, for you. I'll be here attending to matters."

Yes, he would. He would be here reading books, drinking beer, and having Fritz tell anyone who called that he was engaged. It wasn't the first time he had decided that a case wasn't worth the effort. On such occasions my mission was to keep after him until I had him jarred loose, but this time my position was that if Orrie Cather could spend the afternoon in my chair he could damn' well do my work. So I went up to my room to redecorate for the evening out.

It was a very nice evening on all counts. Dinner at Lily Rowan's, while not up to the standard Fritz had got my palate trained to, was always good. So was the show, and so was the dance band at the Flamingo Club, where we went afterward to get better acquainted, since I had only known her seven years. What with this and that I didn't get home until after three o'clock, and, following routine, looked in at the office to jiggle the handle of the safe and

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glance around. If there was a message for me Wolfe always left it on my desk under a paperweight, and there one was, on a sheet from his pad, in his small, thin handwriting that was as easy to read as type.

AG: Your work on the Keyes case has been quite satisfactory. Now that it is solved, you may proceed as arranged and go to Mr. Hewitt's place on Long Island in the morning to get those plants. Theodore will have the cartons ready for you. Don't forget to watch the ventilation. NW

I read it through again, and turned it over to look at the back, to see if there was another installment, but it was blank.

In the Thursday morning papers there wasn't a single word on the Keyes case to indicate that anyone had advanced even an inch in the hot pursuit of the murderer.

And I spent the whole day, from ten to six, driving to Lewis Hewitt's place on Long Island, helping to select and clean and pack ten dozen yearling plants, and driving back home again.

While I was lugging the last carton of plants up the stoop I had a surprise. A car I had often seen before, with PD on it, rolled up to the curb and stopped behind the sedan, and Inspector Cramer emerged from it.

"What has Wolfe got now?" he demanded, coming up the steps to me.

"A dozen Zygopetalum," I told him coldly.

"Let me by," he said rudely.

I did so.

What I should have done, to drive it in that I was now a delivery boy and not a detective, was to go on helping Theodore get the orchids upstairs, and I set my teeth and started to do that, but it wasn't long before Wolfe's bellow came from the office:

"Archie!"

I went on in. Cramer was in the red leather chair with an unlighted cigar tilted toward the ceiling by the grip of his teeth. Wolfe, his tightened lips showing that he was enjoying a quiet, subdued rage, was frowning at him.

"I'm doing important work," I said curtly.

"It can wait. Get Mr. Skinner on the phone."

I would have gone to much greater lengths if Cramer hadn't been there. As it was, all I did was snort as I started to dial.

"Cut it!" Cramer barked savagely.

I went on dialing.

"That will do, Archie," Wolfe told me. I turned from the phone and saw he was still frowning at the inspector but his lips had relaxed. He used them for speech: "I don't see, Mr. Cramer, what better you can ask than the choice I offer. As I told you on the phone, give me your word that you'll cooperate with me on my terms, and I shall at once tell you about it in full detail, including, of course, the justification for it. Or refuse to give me your word, and I shall ask Mr. Skinner if the District Attorney's office would like to cooperate with me. I guarantee only that no harm will be done, but

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my expectation is that the case will be closed. Isn't that fair enough?"

Cramer growled.

"I don't understand," Wolfe declared, "why the devil I bother with you. Mr. Skinner would jump at it."

Cramer's growl became words: "When would it be — tonight?"

"I said you'd get details after I get your promise, but you may have that much. It would be early tomorrow morning, contingent upon delivery of a package I'm expecting. . . . By the way, Archie, you didn't put the car in the garage?"

"No, sir."

"Good. You'll have to go later, probably around midnight, to meet an airplane. It depends on the airplane, Mr. Cramer. If it arrives tomorrow instead of tonight, we'd have to postpone it until Saturday morning."

"Where? Here in your office?"

Wolfe shook his head. "That's one of the details you'll get. Confound it, do I mean what I say?"

"Search me. I never know. You say you'll take my word. Why not take my word that I'll either do it or forget I ever heard it?"

"No. . . . Archie, get Mr. Skinner."

Cramer uttered a word that was for men only. "You and your charades," he said bitterly. "Why do you bother with me? You know very well I'm not going to let you slip it to the D. A.'s office, because you may really have it. Okay. On your terms."

Wolfe nodded. The gleam in his eye nearly escaped even me. "Your notebook, Archie. This is rather elaborate, and I doubt if we can finish before dinner."

"I'll explain gladly," I told Officer Hefferan, "if you'll descend from that horse and get level with me.

Hefferan came off his high horse and was even with me. We were posted on top of the little knoll in Central Park to which he had led me the day I had made his acquaintance.

"All I'm doing," Hefferan said to make it plain, "is obeying orders. I was told to meet you here and listen to you."

I nodded. "And you don't care for it. Neither do I, you stiff-back Cossack, but I've got orders, too. The setup is like this: As you know, down there behind that forest" — I pointed — "is a tool shed. Outside the shed, Keyes's chestnut horse, saddled and bridled, is being held by one of your colleagues. Inside the shed, there are two women named Keyes and Rooney, and four men named Pohl, Talbott, Safford, and Broadyke. Also, Inspector Cramer is there with a detachment from his squad.

"One of the six civilians, chosen by secret ballot, is at this moment changing his or her clothes, putting on bright yellow breeches and a blue jacket, just like the outfit Keyes wore. Between you and me and your horse, the choosing was a put-up job, handled by Inspector Cramer. Dressed like Keyes, the chosen one is going to mount Keyes's horse and ride along that stretch of the bridle path, with

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shoulders hunched and stirrups too long, catch sight of you, and lift his or her crop to you in greeting.

"You are asked to remember that what you were interested in seeing was the horse, not the rider, and to put the question to yourself, did you actually recognize Keyes that morning, or just the horse and the get-up?"

I appealed to him earnestly: "And for God's sake don't say a word to me. You wouldn't admit anything whatever to me, so save it for later, for your superiors. A lot depends on you, which may be regrettable, but it can't be helped. If it won't offend you for me to explain the theory of it, it's this:

"The murderer, dressed like Keyes but covered with a topcoat, was waiting in the park uptown behind that thicket at half past six, when Keyes first rode into the park and got onto the bridle path. If he had shot Keyes out of the saddle from a distance, even a short one, the horse would have bolted, so he stepped out and stopped Keyes, and got hold of the bridle before he pulled the trigger. One bullet for one.

"Then he dragged the body behind the thicket so it couldn't be seen from the bridle path, since another early-morning rider might come along, took off his topcoat, or maybe a thin raincoat, and stuffed it under his jacket, mounted the horse, and went for a ride through the park. He took his time, so as to keep to Keyes's customary schedule. Thirty minutes later, approaching that spot" — I pointed to where the bridle path emerged from behind the trees — "he either saw you up here or waited until he did see you up here, and then rode on along that stretch, giving you the usual salute by lifting his crop.

"But the second he got out of sight at the other end of the stretch he acted fast. He got off the horse and just left it there, knowing it would make its way back to its own exit from the park. Then he beat it in a hurry, either to a bus or the subway, depending on where he was headed for. The idea was to turn the alibi on as soon as possible, since he couldn't be sure how soon the horse would be seen and the search for Keyes would be started. But, at the worst, he had established Keyes as still alive at ten minutes past seven, down here on that stretch, and the body would be found 'way uptown."

"I believe," Hefferan said stiffly, "I am on record as saying I saw Keyes."

"Scratch it," I urged him. "Blot it out. Make your mind a blank, which shouldn't —" I bit it off, deciding it would be undiplomatic, and glanced at my wrist. "It's nine minutes past seven. Where were you that morning — on your horse or off?"

"On."

"Then you'd better mount, to have it the same. Let's be particular — jump on! There he comes!"

I admit the Cossack knew how to get on top of a horse. He was erect in the saddle quicker than I would have had a foot in a stirrup, and had his gaze directed at the end of the stretch

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of the bridle path where it came out of the trees. I also admit the chestnut horse looked fine from up there. It had a proud curve to its neck, and, as Hefferan had said, it had a good set of springs. I strained my eyes to take in the details of the rider's face, but at that distance it couldn't be done. The blue of the jacket, yes, and the yellow of the breeches, and the hunched shoulders, but not the face.

No sound came from Hefferan. As the rider on the bridle path neared the end of the open stretch I strained my eyes again, hoping something would happen, knowing, as I did, what he would find confronting him when he rounded the sharp bend at the finish of the stretch — namely, four mounted cops abreast.

Something happened, all right, fast, and not on my list of expectations. The chestnut was out of sight around the bend not more than half a second, and then here he came back, on the jump, the curve gone out of his neck. But he or his rider had had enough of the bridle path. Ten strides this side of the bend the horse swerved sharp and darted off to the left, off onto the grass in one beautiful leap, and then dead ahead, due east toward Fifth Avenue, showing us his tail. Simultaneously, here came the quartet of mounted cops, like a cavalry charge. When they saw what the chestnut had done, their horses' legs suddenly went stiff, slid ten feet in the loose dirt, and then sashayed for the bound onto the grass, to follow.

Yells were coming from a small mob that had run out of the forest which hid the tool shed. And Hefferan left me. His horse bounded down the slope to join the chase. The sound of gunshots came from the east, and that finished me. I would have given a year's pay, anything up to a kingdom, for a horse, but, having none, I lit out anyway.

Down the slope to the bridle path I broke records, but on the other side it was upgrade, and also I had to dodge trees and bushes and jump railings. I was heading on a beeline for the noises coming from the east, including another round of shots. Finally the border of the park was in sight, but I could see nothing moving, though the noises seemed to be louder and closer. Straight ahead was the stone wall enclosing the park, and, unsure which way to turn for the nearest entrance, I made for the wall, climbed it, stood panting, and surveyed.

I was at 65th Street and Fifth Avenue. One block up, outside a park entrance, the avenue was so cluttered that it was blocked. Cars, mostly taxis, were collecting at both fringes of the intersection, and the pedestrians who hadn't already arrived were on their way, from all directions. The tallest things there were the horses. They were all bays but one, the chestnut, and I was glad to see that he looked healthy as I cantered up the pavement toward the throng. The chestnut's saddle was empty.

I was pushing my way through to the center when someone in uniform grabbed my arm, and I'll be darned if

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Officer Hefferan didn't sing out, "Let him come! That's Nero Wolfe's man Goodwin!" I would have been glad to thank him cordially, but didn't have enough breath yet to speak. So I merely pushed on and, using only my eyes, got my curiosity satisfied.

Victor Talbott, in blue jacket and yellow breeches, apparently as unhurt as the chestnut, was standing there with a city employee hanging onto each arm.

"You will be glad to know," I told Wolfe late that afternoon, "that none of these bills we are sending to our clients will have to be addressed care of the county jail. That would be embarrassing."

It was a little after six, and he was down from the plant-room and had beer in front of him. I was making out the bills.

"Broadyke," I went on, "claims that he merely bought designs that were offered him, not knowing where they came from, and he can probably make it stick. Dorothy has agreed on a settlement with Pohl and will not press the assault charge. As for Dorothy, it's hers now anyway, as you said. And Safford and Audrey can't be prosecuted just for going to ride in the park, even if they omitted it in their statements just to avoid complications. By the way, if you wonder why they allocated fifteen per cent of our fee to a stable hand, he is not a stable hand. He owns that riding academy, by gum, so Audrey hasn't sold out cheap at all. They'll probably be married on horseback, those two."

Wolfe grunted. "That won't improve their chances any."

"You're prejudiced about love," I reproached him. "Talbott believed in it and took a big chance for it, of course —"

"Don't fool yourself," Wolfe interrupted. "That wasn't his only motive. He was under the impression that Keyes would soon know of the stolen designs."

Corrected but unconvinced, I turned back to the expense sheet. "I've been meaning to ask," I asked, "why you wasted money having Saul and Orrie call on New York tailors?"

"It wasn't wasted," Wolfe snapped. He can't stand being accused of wasting money. "There was a slim chance that Mr. Talbott had been ass enough to have his costume made right here. The better chance, of course, was one of the cities he had recently visited, and the best of all was the one farthest away. So I telephoned Los Angeles first, and the Southwest Agency put five men on it. Also, Saul and Orrie did other things. Saul learned, for instance, that Mr. Talbott's room at the hotel was so situated that, by using stairs and a side entrance, he could easily have left and returned at that time of day without being recognized." Wolfe snorted. "I doubt if Mr. Cramer even considered that. Why should he? He had taken that policeman's word that he had seen Mr. Keyes on a horse, alive and well, at ten minutes past seven."

"Good here," I agreed. "But, as-

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suming that it might have been the murderer, not Keyes, the cop had seen alive on a horse, why did you immediately pick Talbott for it?"

"I didn't. The facts did. The masquerade, if there was one, could have helped no one but Mr. Talbott, since an alibi for that moment at that spot would have been useless for any of the others. Also, the greeting exchanged at a distance with the policeman was an essential of the plan, and only Mr. Talbott, who often rode with Mr. Keyes, could have known there would be an opportunity for it."

"Okay," I conceded. "And you phoned Pohl to find out where Talbott had been recently. Say, Pohl actually helped on it! By the way, the Southwest Agency put an airmail stamp on the envelope containing their bill, so I guess they want a check. Their part of the charge is reasonable enough, but that tailor wants three hundred bucks for making a blue jacket and a pair of yellow breeches."

"Which our clients will pay," Wolfe said placidly. "It isn't exorbitant. It was five o'clock in the afternoon there when they found him, and he had to be persuaded to spend the night at it, duplicating the previous order."

"Okay," I conceded again. "I admit it had to be a real duplicate, label and all, to panic that baby. He had nerve. He gets his six o'clock call at his hotel, says to wake him again at seven-thirty, beats it to the street without being seen, puts on his act, and gets back to his room in time to take the seven-thirty call. And don't forget he was committed right from the beginning, at half past six, when he shot Keyes. From there on he had to make his schedule. Some nerve."

I got up and handed the bills, including copies of the itemized expense account, across to Wolfe for his inspection.

"You know," I remarked, sitting down again, "that was close to the top for a shock to the nervous system, up there this morning. When he got picked to double for Keyes that must have unsettled him a little, to begin with. Then he gets ushered into the other room to change, and is handed a box that has on it 'Cleever of Hollywood.' He opens it, and there is an outfit exactly like the one he had had made, and had got well rid of somehow along with the gun, and there again is a label in the jacket, 'Cleever of Hollywood.'

"I'm surprised he was able to get it on and buttoned up, and walk out to the horse and climb into the saddle. He did have nerve. I suppose he intended just to keep on going, but as he rounded the bend there were the four mounted cops, and flup went his nerves — and I don't blame him. I admit I hadn't the faintest idea, when I was phoning you that list of towns Pohl had given me — Hey! Wait a minute!"

Wolfe looked up. "What's the matter?"

"Give me back that expense list! I left out the ninety-five cents for Pohl's sandwiches!"

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WINNER OF A SECOND PRIZE: Q. PATRICK

The two authors, Richard Webb and Hugh Wheeler, who call themselves Q. Patrick (and on other occasions, Patrick Quentin and Jonathan Stagge) possess a proud distinction in our little red book: for Q. Patrick is the only detective-story writer (duo or solo) who has won a prize in all five annual contests sponsored by EQMM. We can pay no greater compliment to Q. Patrick than what that simple statement implies: to have won five prizes in five years is an extraordinary proof of their consistency of performance, of the sheer quality of their year-in and year-out accomplishments. Q. Patrick's devotion to the genre we all love is on the highest level of integrity, and we can only hope that the members of Mystery Writers of America have the good sense to award an "Edgar" to Q. Patrick for their outstanding contribution to the detective short story.

Further comments after you have read "A Boy's Will" . . .

A BOY'S WILL

by Q. PATRICK

GIMME halfa dollar, Joe. I'm hongry. Gimme halfa dollar, Joe." The Italian gutter G. I. slang whined in a boy's hoarse voice behind John Godolphin as he walked away from the little chapel where he had spent a morning studying the Byzantine mosaics. After a year in bomb-scarred chaotic Palermo, John Godolphin had learned to ignore the beggars who swarmed importunately along the shabby, once elegant streets. His sensitive soul revolted against poverty and drabness. If these Sicilians were poor, it was not his fault. It was a scandal that resident Americans should have this constant strain on their charity.

"Aw, c'mon, Joe. Gimme halfa buck. I'm hongry."

He felt a hand tug tentatively at his sleeve. He swung around in irritation. That was how he first met Sebastiano.

The boy, who could not have been more than fourteen, was watching him from unblinking dark eyes, soft as wallflower petals. The sturdy, honey-brown body was scantily covered by a tattered G. I. T-shirt and a pair of faded blue shorts. A hand was stretched out — dirty, broken-nailed, quivering with hope.

Once John saw him, he was no longer conscious of his irritation. For the boy was beautiful — really beautiful. And John Godolphin worshipped Beauty — much, he felt, as the Italian Renaissance painters had once worshipped it. It had been this

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love of Beauty which had made him buy a villa in Palermo where he could indulge his frail talent for water colors in a charming milieu of antique palaces and Countesses' tea parties, far from the discouraging crudities of his native America. Now all the connoisseur in him responded to Sebastiano.

"An angel," thought John Godolphin. Not the insipid Nordic conception of an angel, but a warm-blooded Mediterranean angel who, long before Christianity, might have been a Faun.

"Charity, Signore. For the love of the sacred Maria."

The child spoke now in a crooning Italian which dispelled the impertinent impression made by the raffish American slang. John Godolphin's plump, rather babyish face suffused with smiles. He gave the boy a hundred-lira bill. He noticed too that one of the bare knees was scraped and bleeding from a fall. Impulsively he took a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it into the boy's hand.

"You'd better take this too — for your knee."

A blinding smile transfigured Sebastiano's face. He clutched John's hand and carried it to his lips.

"You are my friend, Signore — my friend for eternity."

From then on Sebastiano haunted John, bringing a dash of excitement and color to his self-indulgent, almost spinsterish days. The boy's devotion was touching. He protected John savagely from all the other street beggars and never again asked for money, although John usually gave it to him. Whenever John left the Villa Godolphin in his spruce horse-drawn carriage to visit the old Duquesa or the Palazzo Carduccio, Sebastiano was sure to appear from the anonymity of the slums, racing beside the carriage, smiling his angel's smile, a hand ready to dart deftly for the tossed bill or the butt of one of John's specially-made Turkish cigarettes.

Sometimes he had another child with him, a solemn little urchin of nine or ten, whom he called "my pal, Mario." Once Mario caught the fluttering bill and Sebastiano knocked him down and took it from him. Obscurely, it pleased John Godolphin to know that Sebastiano could hold his own against the pack.

For the boy had become his pet charity, almost his pet dog.

And like a dog he was ubiquitous.

One afternoon John had been lunching at the Palazzo Carduccio and was wandering in the gardens, searching for a subject to sketch as a little present for Teresa Carduccio, when he came upon Rosa, one of the Contessa's maidservants, cutting fennel in the vegetable patch. The scene made a charming composition and John paused to speak to the girl, hoping to get her to pose for him. But Rosa's earthy Sicilian mind misinterpreted his interest. Outraging all John's New England shibboleths, she rose with a shameless smile, and while he clutched his paintbox ineffectually, she twined her arms

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around him and pressed her soft young lips to his.

"You want a little love, Signore. All Americans are the same. I will give you love."

John pushed her away, his face crimson with embarrassment. But the girl only laughed and came toward him again.

This was when Sebastiano, the watchdog, appeared from nowhere over the garden wall with little Mario. Screaming ferociously at the girl, Sebastiano drove her off to the kitchen quarters.

From then on John's warm feeling for Sebastiano was enhanced by gratitude. But it took him several distracted days to recover from the experience with Rosa. He avoided the Palazzo Carduccio; and the Contessa, who was ignorant of the circumstances, only managed to coax him back with the promise of an irresistibly select little luncheon.

It was at this party that John Godolphin learned the shocking news of Rosa's murder.

The girl had been found stabbed to death with a stiletto in a public park, and all the guests were agog, with the exception of the old Duquesa who had been a lady-in-waiting to the Queen and concerned herself only with royal scandals.

"Just a jealous lover," she exclaimed loftily. "These things are so common in Sicily. So barbarous!"

But even the Duquesa was interested when Teresa announced that the police had found at the scene a fine initialed linen handkerchief, stained with the girl's blood. This handkerchief was clearly the property of a "non-barbarous" gentleman.

The Marquesa Landini, whose sharp tongue was notorious, laughed her caustic laugh and remarked: "There'll be many distinguished noses quaking as they are blown today."

When John Godolphin drove homeward along the dazzling blue waterfront, he felt a little shaken. In the light of what had happened to Rosa, it was fortunate that no one but his "friend for eternity" had witnessed the scene in the vegetable patch. It very well might have been misconstrued. It might have been very awkward indeed.

John glanced almost wistfully out of the carriage in the hopes of seeing Sebastiano among a group of children who were tumbling through some noisy game in the ruins of a luxury hotel. But there was no sign of him.

John felt depressed. He now looked upon Sebastiano as his good-luck charm. The boy's absence seemed faintly ominous.

At the Villa Godolphin tea was ritualistically awaiting him in the baroque splendor of the salone which he so much loved. He was nibbling one of his cook's inspired Sicilian pastries when the housemaid came in to announce that a boy wanted to see him.

"A dirty boy, Signore. A beggar. He says he is called Sebastiano."

John was both pleased and surprised. Like a timid demi-god of the

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olive orchards, Sebastiano had never before dared to approach the Villa Godolphin itself. It would be charming to entertain him for a little while, to give him one of these delicious cannelonis. He told the maid to send the boy in, and soon Sebastiano appeared in the doorway, his head lowered respectfully.

John beckoned him to the silver tea tray and told him to select any pastry he wanted. The boy gazed, wide-eyed, at the elegant assortment of food. Cautiously he reached for a little chocolate cake. Once it was actually in his hand, he seemed to gain confidence. He wolfed it down and took another. With the second pastry poised between finger and thumb, he began to move around the room, peering at the pictures and tapestries, delicately caressing John's scrupulously chosen bricabrac. John watched him, enchanted by the natural grace of his movements. At length the boy returned and sat down opposite him on a huge brocade sofa. He smiled his sudden, swooning smile.

"Nice place you gotta here. Oh, boy!"

"Please don't use that horrible English," said John in Italian.

Still smiling, the child leaned back, testing the comfort of the couch. The plump upholstery seemed to delight him. He swung his legs up and lay stretched at full length, his dirty bare feet pressed against a rose-pink silk cushion. He glanced sidewise at John and said in his mellifluous Italian:

"It pleases me here. Where I live — very poor. My brothers, my sisters, my father, my mother, all in one little, little room."

"That's too bad," said John, wishing such subjects need not be broached and worrying now about the silk cushion.

"Yes," murmured Sebastiano, wriggling against the upholstery. "It pleases me here. How beautiful!" He threw the angel's smile again at John. "It would please you to adopt me as your little son?"

A wild notion, which had come before, entered John's mind. A beautiful son of his own to mold like a sculptor? The notion collapsed. With a little ironical smile at himself, John knew that his fastidious love for his cushions would always be stronger than any affection he could develop for dirty feet.

Banteringly, he said: "Wouldn't it be charming if I could?"

"A nice bed all the time," mused Sebastiano. "Lots of food all the time. Lots of sleep." The boy sat bolt upright. "Shall I begin now? Shall I never go away?"

"But your parents could never spare you, Sebastiano. You're joking."

The long lashes veiled the child's eyes in an expression of infinite sadness. "How can I joke when poor Rosa is dead? Poor Rosa who was the fidanzata of my brother Gino?"

"Rosa?" John's plump cheeks quivered. "What has Rosa to do with anything?"

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"Ah," declared Sebastiano, "men are all the same. When I grow up, I will be the same too. Little Mario and I see you making love with Rosa. You get tired of her. Probably she asks money from you, threatens." He shrugged. "Women are stupid cows. They deserve what befalls them."

"Sebastiano!" cried John.

The child rose and put a golden hand caressingly on John's arm. "You must not be afraid. I am your friend. I shall never tell. And little Mario — who cares for his childish talk? Of course, the police have found by the body your handkerchief with the pretty G on it. But how will they ever know that G stands for Signore Godolphin? My friend, you must not be afraid."

John Godolphin pushed the boy's hand away, panic coiling through him. Impossibly, the charming bubble of his life seemed to be bursting. Sebastiano could *not* have planted the handkerchief he had given him by the body! Sebastiano could *not* be saying what he was saying! Sebastiano was a child, a little boy with an angel's face, whom he had befriended.

He jumped up. "What have you done, Sebastiano? Tell me! What do you know? Who killed Rosa?"

"Now it is you who are joking. You dropped your handkerchief. It was foolish, but there is no cause for alarm."

"But this is absurd, wicked." John Godolphin, whose closest brush with the Law had been a parking ticket in Poughkeepsie, tried feebly to grasp the fact of Evil. "The police would never believe you. Get out of my house! Get out at once!"

Sebastiano smiled serenely. "But why would the police not believe me? I have never been in trouble like some of the bad boys. I am an innocent little child. You try to threaten me, offer to give me money to keep me quiet. But poor though I am, I can think only of justice and the unfortunate Rosa." He went to the tea tray and picked up a piece of pastry in both hands. He started to eat one. He might have been a figure from an Etruscan vase. "Always we have such lovely things to eat? And a bed? A big, big bed like I see in the cinema, where you can sleep with your legs stretched out and there is no one to kick you?"

Sebastiano sighed.

"Ah, it pleases me here."

Looking back from the nightmare that followed, John Godolphin saw that this had been the one moment when he could still have escaped from the trap. He cursed himself a thousand times for a cowardice which had, barnacle-wise, encrusted him during forty-five years sheltered by inherited money, by gentility, by his faded nineteenth-century belief that the harmless always remain unharmed.

He could have thrown the boy out then and faced the issue of the handkerchief squarely. It was not

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entirely that he was afraid of being arrested for Rosa's murder, although he shuddered as he imagined the effect of Sebastiano's accusation, babbled out with tears and childish innocence. It was the overtones that unmanned John Godolphin's little soul, the tittered gossip around Teresa Carduccio's lunch table, the Marquesa's tart, socially-destroying quip, the cold, cutting eye of the old Duquesa.

All these concomitants of scandal were too much for him at a moment when he needed courage. John Godolphin's weapons of self-defense had rusted, and this child with an old man's insight had exactly gauged his weakness.

That night Sebastiano slept in the largest, most luxurious room in the Villa. That night John Godolphin started down the path into darkness.

During the early days of the capitulation John tried to tell himself that, since disaster had struck, things might have been worse. The first morning, after a late breakfast in bed brought up to him by an outraged housemaid, Sebastiano had demanded money for clothes. But once they had been bought, he was not too much in evidence. He seemed fascinated by his own appearance and spent narcissistic hours in front of a mirror, trying on this shirt and that, strutting in a blue suit, lovingly alternating his ties. He was even neat about the house and charmingly helpful to the perplexed and hostile servants.

In hideous parody John had what he had sometimes thought he craved — the adopted son, the Little Lord Fauntleroy on whom to lavish his middle-aged affection.

But one morning when John returned from a miserably unsuccessful attempt to sketch the Royal Palace, he found Sebastiano lolling in the salone with little Mario perched opposite him. Sebastiano was drinking sherry from the Venetian glass decanter and smoking one of John's personal monogrammed cigarettes. Little Mario had nothing. He was sitting with his bare legs dangling high above the floor, his eyes fixed yearningly on the sherry decanter.

When Sebastiano saw John, he gestured with the cigarette. "Aw, give Mario a coupla bucks, Joe. He's hongry."

He was using the American slang which he knew John hated, and for the first time arrogance stared unconcealed from his eyes. John realized that his capitulation had reached a second crisis. Sebastiano was testing his own strength and John's weakness. If he got away with this studied insolence, he would know that his victory was complete. But, keen though John's insight was, a paralyzing weakness overcame him. If he protested now, Sebastiano would humiliate him before this tiny urchin, and that he could not face.

He handed Mario a thousand-lira note. Mario got up and on timid tiptoe, stood at the table side. Reaching out, he touched the decanter with

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a fingertip. He was aglow with wonder. It was not the wine that fascinated him, John guessed; it was the sparkle of the exquisitely cut glass.

"Bello," he whispered at the decanter and at this rich man's wonderland where such things could be.

Suddenly Sebastiano swung round and saw him. Scowling, he raised his hand as if to strike the child.

"Animal, pig, do not touch. Go — go away from this house and never come back. Go! This is a gentleman's house. Not fit for the pigs like you."

As the little boy scurried away, John noticed that there were wine stains on the quattrocento table, and Sebastiano was dropping his cigarette ash lazily on the carpet.

That night Sebastiano got theatrically drunk. Up in his own room, John could hear the boy tramping and cursing around the Villa until the small hours of the morning. He did not get up until noon the next day and then only to scream down the staircase for his lunch. When the housemaid brought it up, he rejected it, yelling obscenities and throwing the tray on the floor. John found his dirty socks on a couch in the living room. Sebastiano spat at the cook and insulted the coachman. Once again John knew exactly what the boy was working toward, but stultifying apathy and fear now had him in their grip.

It took Sebastiano exactly three well-planned days to get rid of the servants.

After the last of them, the cook, had left in a flurry of tears and bundles, he was sweet and affectionate to John. He squatted at his feet in the salone, smiling up at him.

"Aw, forget it, Joe. Justa old hens. My mother's a swell cook. She cooks spaghetti fine. Oh, boy." He put a soft hand on John's knee. "You gonna like my mother's spaghetti."

Nervous exhaustion gave John a false courage. "I won't have it!" he cried. "You've deliberately insulted my servants and driven them out of the house to bring in your own wretched family. I won't have it, I say! Get out of here at once or I will call the police."

"And the police will believe you now?" queried Sebastiano. "Maybe at first they believe. But not now. You bring me to live in your house, you buy me fine clothes. Why?" He scratched his back idly. "No, you lika my mother. She cook spaghetti fine. You lika my big brother Gino too, the fidanzato of Rosa. He drives the carriage swell. Oh, boy!"

Sebastiano's family moved in that evening — his mother, his father, his grown brother, a nubile sister, and a trio of infants and babies. Semi-hypnotized, John watched Sebastiano showing them proudly through room after room of the Villa. The mother, a forlorn mousy creature, tried to install her brood in the kitchen quarters, but Sebastiano would have none of that. They weren't to be servants, he assured them. They were the guests of the Signore Godolphin

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whose benevolence was as infinite as that of the Blessed Santa Lucia.

John saw then that Sebastiano ruled his own family just as autocratically as he ruled the Villa Godolphin. At fourteen, in that most patriarchal of all societies, his extravagant will to survive had made him the head of the household. With a flash of illumination, John saw too that he and all of them had become part of a boy's dream. No adult would have dared push his advantage to this extreme point. There was a child's naivete mingled with the evil. Somehow that added a final touch of horror.

And for John horror hovered close at that first dinner, served in his sumptuous dining hall, where the family sat in reluctant tongue-tied silence while Sebastiano, at the head of the table, dispensed greasy spaghetti from an earthenware kitchen pot. The mother and father were both timid and respectful, yearning for the obscurity of the kitchen, thanking John haltingly over and over again for his great honor to their unworthiness. But brother Gino, a large, hulking youth, was immediately adaptable to good fortune. So was Emilia, the handsome, overblown sister.

After dinner, Sebastiano brought out John's French cognac and while the mother put the young children to bed upstairs, a rowdy party developed in the salone. They played the radio blastingly, and Gino and Teresa hurled themselves through jitterbug steps. Sebastiano, shining-eyed, danced by himself.

The baby and one of the younger sisters had been installed in the room next to John's. The baby whimpered as John, who had always been a conventional moralist, lay sleepless, trying to understand what it was he had done that had brought this Nemesis upon him.

It was partly, of course, his cowardice. He had never thought that being brave or not brave mattered in a world which still seemed to him to have some logic, some law. But perhaps it had been lack of heart too. Because he had never stopped to think of the poor or the war-torn, he had never dreamed what evil poverty and war could spawn.

Uproarious laughter, rich, unthinking, happy, sounded from downstairs, mingling with the baby's whining.

John Godolphin thought of Sebastiano's smiling face. *And the police will believe you now?*

Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, he murmured and turned his face to the wall.

Since John could not face the Truth which had come to the Villa Godolphin, he spent most of his time in the days that followed away from the house. The arrogant swagger of Gino, the supposed coachman, intimidated him, so he wandered aimlessly about Palermo on foot. Gossip travels fast in provincial Italy and he did not dare visit his friends for fear of what they would be thinking.

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One morning he met the Marquesa Landini outside the Theatro Massimo. The Marquesa leaned out of her carriage, her thin aristocratic face sharpened by malice.

"Really, Mr. Godolphin, I hear you are suffering from a case of wholesale charity these days. They tell me the daughter is extremely attractive in a coarse way. I suppose it *is* the daughter, isn't it? But why did you have to take in the entire family?"

John felt the hot blood mounting to his face. Teresa Carduccio did not invite him to her next Thursday. He met the old Duquesa in the Cathedral Square and she walked right past him in a cloud of black lace.

Deeply wounded by this final snub, John found the blaring of the radio in the salone unendurable that evening. He slipped out of the front door and stood, exhausted, under the great baroque portico. A tiny figure was hovering like a night bird in the shadows of the garden. It was little Mario. John was strangely pleased to see someone — anyone — who was not an immediate part of Sebastiano's all-pervading flock. He made a move toward him, but suddenly Sebastiano appeared from the doorway.

With shouts of anger Sebastiano plunged at Mario. The small boy scampered away. Sebastiano tossed rocks after him. He turned to John, his young god's face blazing with fury.

"The little pig! He never shall come into *my* house. Never into *my* house."

It was the "my" that decided John upon flight. What had happened had left him stripped of all delusions about himself. He had not had the courage to fight before; he knew he would never have the courage to fight now. But he could summon up the strength to escape. It would mean abandoning his beloved Villa and all the treasures he had so fastidiously amassed. But at least he could know again what it was to be free from a boy's demented dream.

The next morning he went downtown and bought a plane ticket to Rome. The plane left at seven that evening. When the time came, he did not dare to take with him even a small suitcase through the barrage of black Sicilian eyes. He walked some distance from the Villa and then hired a carriage to the airport.

He was in the queue waiting to enter the plane when the policeman came and politely asked him to step aside for a moment. Sebastiano, seraphic and neat in his new blue suit, was standing on the weary airport grass, smiling at him.

The policeman produced a gold cigarette case which John recognized as his own.

"Does this belong to you, sir?"

John stammered: "Why, yes."

The policeman patted Sebastiano's head. "This little boy found it in your carriage. You should give him a reward."

Sebastiano looked blandly from John to the policeman. John knew

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from the boy's expression exactly what he was meant to know. If he took the plane, Sebastiano would report him to the police as Rosa's murderer. He would certainly be picked up at the Rome airport.

Neither he nor Sebastiano spoke as they returned to the Villa Godolphin.

From that moment John knew that for some reason the boy had not yet finished with him, and he was not kept long in suspense. Two days later, Sebastiano brought to him a small, cringing man with frayed cuffs and a dilapidated brief-case. This, said Sebastiano, was his Uncle Giulio, a very clever man, a lawyer. He had brought a paper for John to sign. With much bowing and scraping the little man produced a document from his brief-case and handed it to John.

It was a deed of gift, yielding the Villa and all its contents to Sebastiano's father as guardian for Sebastiano himself who was to come into full possession at the age of twenty-one.

John Godolphin had lived more in the last few weeks than in all his life before. He had learned so many things. And now he knew that there is a perverse pleasure even in the extremity of torment. There comes a point where the prisoner almost loves his chains, where the victim lifts a willing throat to the sacrificial knife. He signed the paper and Uncle Giulio went away. For the rest of the day John sat idly on the sunny terrace. The indeterminate brothers and sisters crawled and squalled and fought around him. But he felt a strange lightness that carried him somehow beyond his body.

The pressure had been relaxed. In abject defeat, John had discovered, there is peace.

He slept late the next morning. Why not? It was almost eleven when Emilia, the broad, pleasure smile sponged off her face, burst into his bedroom without knocking and said he was wanted downstairs.

"The police," she said. "Something has happened with the police."

John took his time about dressing. He carefully chose his most elegant tie and when he looked in the mirror to brush his hair, surveyed his round, uninteresting face with none of his customary dislike. His years of nonentity were over. He was something now, if only a boy's puppet.

When he walked into the littered salone, the whole family was there. So were three policemen. John took in the squalid picture with an exactness he had never been able to marshall when, as an artist, he had studied a pretty landscape or a quaint house with a view to painting it.

But it was Sebastiano, as always, who fixed his attention. In his handsome blue suit the boy was crouched on his knees before one of the policemen. His arms were encircling the man's legs. His beautiful, tragic face was ravaged with despair.

"What I have done is a sin, a sin," he moaned in Italian. "I can no longer sleep with it on my conscience. He

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gave me money. He brought me here to live with him. He did everything for my family. And because I was weak I promised to lie. But I cannot — not any more. I went to the priest and he gives me no absolution unless I confess."

He swung round on his knees, pointing at John. There were round, shiny tears on his dusky cheeks. "It is his handkerchief. He killed Rosa. I saw him do it. He frightened me. He gave me money. But I must tell the truth. He killed her."

The pattern was complete now. With strange clairvoyance John saw the symmetry of it. Sebastiano's childish imagination had its limits. He probably had never heard of bank accounts. He could not grasp the fact that he could have milked John for years to come. He had had a slum child's dream of a palace, and stupendously he had made of his dream an actuality. He had the house now. Legally, it was his and John, who had outlived his usefulness, was to be cynically tossed to the police for removal and ultimate extinction.

John looked at the boy's glorious, tear-stained face. There was nothing to say really. You muddle through life; you have no aim. But eventually you know what you were made for — and the pattern is complete.

He waited for the policeman to cross to him. What would they do? They had the handkerchief; that was all the evidence they could possibly need.

But the head policeman turned to Gino. Astonishingly, the two other policemen, the underlings, jumped on Sebastiano's brother and snapped handcuffs on his wrists.

That was the first time that John Godolphin noticed little Mario. The tiny boy had emerged from behind the couch and was straining on tiptoe to witness this interesting procedure.

Gino's struggle was ineffectual. The chief policeman had scooped little Mario up in his arms and with all the pomp of his exalted position was frowning at Gino.

"Gino Coletti, you are under arrest for the murder of your mistress, Rosa Morini. This little child was a witness to the crime. He saw your brother Sebastiano plant Signore Godolphin's handkerchief at the scene, and he has told us all about your brother's plan to put the blame on the American Signore."

Safe in the policeman's arms, little Mario looked down solemnly at Sebastiano. Suddenly he smiled. John had never seen him smile before. The small dirty face was transformed into the prettiness of a Verrochio Eros.

Snarling, Sebastiano leaped up at Mario. But the policeman merely held Mario higher, as one holds a leg of lamb from a greedy dog.

Sebastiano was weeping passionately when they handcuffed him. John Godolphin dropped onto his brocade couch. Yes, there was a pattern here, too. There had been no room for Mario in Sebastiano's great greedy dream. And Mario had dreams of his own . . .

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From somewhere in John's mind came the memory of a vulgar jingle he had not heard since his nursery days.

Big fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite them,
And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so ad infinitum.

His tired gaze fell on the soiled pink cushion. He would have to get it recovered.

He would have to buy new drapes too. . . .

White roses were nodding fatly in the rinsed October sunlight that afternoon as John Godolphin sat on the terrace. A broken rocking horse and a Spam-can bucket lay on the warm terracotta tiles as last remaining relics of Sebastiano's younger brothers and sisters. It didn't matter. Later he would search out his former servants. He could persuade them to come back, he knew. Order would be restored.

Little Mario arrived so silently that John did not see him until he was standing very still on the edge of the terrace. He was wearing a U.S. Army fatigue blouse which reached almost to the ground, like a skirt. He smiled tentatively. John smiled back.

"They have taken Sebastiano to prison," said Mario in Italian.

"Yes."

"And they have taken Gino. They will hang Gino." Mario moved a step nearer. He was peering behind John toward the hidden glories of the salone. "They will hang Gino because of me. I told them he had killed Rosa and they believed me."

He seemed lost in the wonder of this fact — that the police had believed him.

"You were a very good boy," said John. He took out his wallet and selected a thousand-lira bill. He held it toward the child. "And this is for you."

Mario came close to the bill and looked down at it from round black eyes. Then his eyes went up to John's face.

"No. I do not take money."

"You foolish boy, of course you must take it."

Little Mario glanced at the upholstered porch chair next to John. He moved to it, paused, gazing at it, and then started slowly to climb into it. Once there, he rolled back against the blue cushions with a grunt of contentment.

"It is beautiful here. So beautiful. Where I live, everything poor, poor."

John stirred in his chair.

Little Mario had plucked a big, cabbagy rose and was stroking his soft olive cheek with it. He glanced at John and then glanced away shyly.

"The police believed me when I said I saw Gino killing Rosa. But perhaps that was a lie. Perhaps it was you I saw killing Rosa." From a pocket in the fatigue blouse he produced the butt of one of John's monogrammed cigarettes. "Perhaps you frightened me and bribed me

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with money not to tell that I found this cigarette by the body. Perhaps everything I said against Gino and Sebastiano was a lie.

Suddenly little Mario grinned at John. There was a gaping hole in the smile. He must have lost a baby tooth since morning. John felt an old weariness creeping through him like the shadow of a cloud across a sunny meadow. Was this then the destined pattern? Was it to be a circle?

"I could sleep in the room where Sebastiano slept," said the dreamy, singsong voice. "The room with the big, big bed. And my mother will please you very much. I know it, Signore. She cooks the spaghetti good, good."

Little Mario stirred luxuriously in the porch chair. He dropped the rose. It fell on the warm tiles by the empty Spam-can.

A boy's will is the wind's will,
And the thoughts of youth are long,
long thoughts.

— LONGFELLOW

A few notes on the source and background of Q. Patrick's "A Boy's Will": While traveling in Sicily after World War II, Q. Patrick was shocked by the contrast between, on the one hand, the abject poverty of the masses and on the other, of the small centers of luxury peopled by effete aristocrats and expatriated foreigners (mostly American). The Patricks became fascinated, nearly obsessed, with the idea of bringing these two contrasting groups together, and in such a way that one group got a stranglehold on the other. In John Godolphin you met the pre-war type of man who is unable to adapt himself to the post-war world. In Sebastiano you met the real war victim — the child who might normally have been as sweet and angelic as he looked had he not been trampled and twisted by The Four Grim Horsemen who either ride rampant over the world or periodically go underground. Only peace on earth, good will toward man, only the sincere practice of the golden rule, rather than the paying of mere lip-service, will destroy those Horsemen and their evil steeds and evil seeds . . .

"Sebastiano" is all too common today in Italy, Germany, and other suffering nations, and his potentialities for keeping the Horsemen in their saddles are as great as those of the dictators and warmongers and exponents of greed and power who spawned all the little "Sebastianos" of our weary world. Shakespeare warned us more than three centuries ago that "the evil that men do lives after them" — but man learns little in three centuries, not even that it is later, much later, than we think. Time is the Invisible Man, and he passes among us unseen, unheard, and unheeded . . .

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SOME OF MY BEST FRIENDS

by STUART PALMER

Plato having defined man to be a two-legged animal without feathers, Diogenes plucked a cock and brought it into the Academy, and said, "This is Plato's man."
— DIOGENES LAERTIUS

DUPIN

HERCULE POIROT

IN THAT ribald semi-classic, PENGUIN ISLAND, it pleased the whimsical fancy of Anatole France to write the history of his native land in the form of a fable about the myopic but very holy St. Mael, who set sail from the Abbey of Yvern in a granite trough and landed in the polar regions among a colony of the lesser *spheniscidae*. The near-sighted saint mistook them for humans and gave them Christian baptism, with surprising results on earth and in heaven. St. Mael saw penguins as humankind; indeed, so they became in a sort of *ex post facto* miracle, though it is obvious (at least in the drawings of Frank C. Papé) that even after the Heaven-decreed transformation, they always retained some of the physical and mental characteristics of their forebears.

PHILO VANCE

FATHER BROWN

SHERLOCK HOLMES

NERO WOLFE

Perhaps it is inevitable that as a result of years of friendly association with penguins I find myself developing an optical defect similar to that of the venerable St. Mael's — granting that penguins, baptized or not, are very like people. Indeed, they are a very wonderful and endearing people to anyone who has had the good

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REGGIE FORTUNE

THE OLD MAN IN THE CORNER

DR. THORNDYKE

fortune to walk hand-in-flipper with Gracie, the belle of the colony of four-foot-tall Emperors in Regent's Park, London; to anyone who has sported with the late lamented Paddlewings, clown of the old Aquarium at New York's Battery; or to anyone who has worked on Hollywood movie sets with Oscar or Penguin Pete, both originally from the Galapagos. The former fainted under the hot Kleig lights and during the last week of shooting on *The Penguin Pool Murder* had to have a duck as a stand-in. Pete, a more seasoned trouper who had a wardrobe of sixty-four changes and disguises, could and did steal scenes even from the late Jack Barrymore.

Some of my best friends are penguins. Besides, there are the hundreds of statuettes — miniature penguins made of glass and gold and tin and wood and soap and silver and Copenhagen ware and almost every kind of semi-precious stone — which crowd my bookshelves and dominate the atmosphere of my study, and which are no doubt responsible for the tone of my literary creations. If it were not for these perky mannikins, things might have been different. But I am satisfied, or at least resigned. I would rather have a flock of penguins around the place any day than a raven perched on the bust of Pallas just above my chamber door.

Penguins are without doubt the most nearly human among the so-called lower orders of life. Being without true feathers, they fit Plato's definition of man even more closely

SIR HENRY MERRIVALE

JOHN J. MALONE

MISS WITHERS

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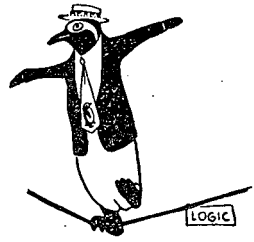
than Socrates' plucked rooster. They are sociable, inquisitive, dignified creatures, with a highly developed social structure, rigid though sensible codes of behavior, and strong family ties. As Anatole France wrote in his preface to PENGUIN ISLAND, "[They] attract notice by their grave and placid air, their comic dignity, their trustful familiarity, their sly simplicity, their habits at once awkward and solemn. . . [They are] abounding in speech, eager to see anything novel, immersed in public affairs, and perhaps a little jealous of all that is superior to them."

PETER WIMSEY



ELLERY QUEEN

MR. TUTT

MAX CARRADOS

THE THINKING MACHINE

PHILO GUBB

The trouble with looking too long upon the human side of penguins is that one comes eventually to look on the penguin side of humans. Have you seen our younger people recently, at a party or showing off in a swimming pool? Have you noticed the crowd that gathers around a building excavation to watch the steam-shovel, or attended a publisher's cocktail party to introduce a new author? Pure penguin behavior-patterns. And Charlie Chaplin made several million dollars by learning to walk like a penguin.

But if people partake of the nature of penguins this must also be true of the realest people of all — the great and beloved detectives of fiction. One who has read mystery stories since he could read at all comes increasingly to feel that these sleuths are close friends, unchanging blithe companions in a worsening world. As for their immortality, let me remind any skep-

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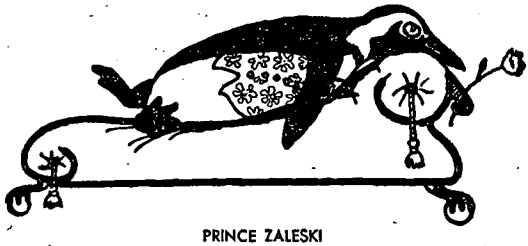


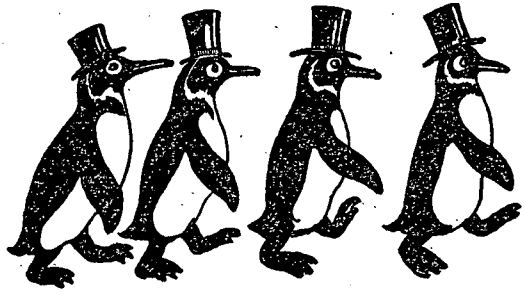
PRINCE ZALESKI

tical reader that now, more than sixty years after Mr. Sherlock Holmes first gripped the hand of Dr. John Watson ("with a strength for which I should hardly have given him credit"), he still continues to receive a considerable amount of personal mail from all over the world, addressed to that most real of all fictional addresses, 221B Baker Street.

Take Holmes. There is a super-penguin. "But," you say, "there was a good deal of the lone wolf in Holmes. He was a hawk, or a fox, or a bloodhound." But was he? The wolf and hawk and fox are predatory, selfish, and cruel; the bloodhound is a shambling, noisy plodder. Like the penguin, Sherlock Holmes has a strongly developed social consciousness. When he chose, he could get on with all classes of society. He has a deep intrinsic regard for the rights and property of others, a consuming intellectual curiosity, and a diffident aloofness toward females.

"Come, Watson, come! The game is afoot!" And Holmes, aquiline beak prominent beneath his plaid shooting-cap, goes striding along foggy streets on the trail of Professor James (Robert) Moriarty, or of Colonel Sebastian Moran, the second most dangerous man in London.

Perhaps the only other detective who can be mentioned in the same breath with Holmes is his spiritual progenitor and legator, the Chevalier



JIMMIE LAVENDER GAY FALCON THE LONE WOLF BULLDOG DRUMMOND

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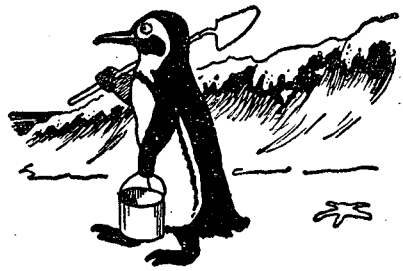
MISS MARPLE JANE AMANDA EDWARDS MISS SILVER

C. Auguste Dupin. But the hot breath of the chase is not for Dupin. Effete and yet casual in a satin beret, he leans against a certain lamp-post on a dark street in Paris, and waits for the game to come to him.

Or take Father Brown, another of the true immortals. His penguin counterpart stands on the top shelf of my bookcase, needing only the addition of a clerical collar to be the very image of the tubby, benevolent, mystical little priest who hated crime and yet was too soft-hearted to wait around to watch the arrest of any of the poor wretches he had laid by the heels.

Or turn another page of this penguin family album, and we come upon the inimitable Sir Henry Merrivale. "H.M." has been laid low again, this time by an attack of the gout, and no doubt is empurpling the very air of the Senior Conservatives Club with some of his fanciest billingsgate. From the depths of another big chair across the room we see the protruding beak of Mycroft Holmes — yes, count him too among the greats, for even Sherlock turned now and again for advice to his somnolent but wiser brother.

Before a convenient mirror Hercule Poirot preens his magnificent mustaches, done forever with the cultivation of vegetable marrows. Are you beginning to notice how many of the detective-fiction greats possess the



ASEY MAYO

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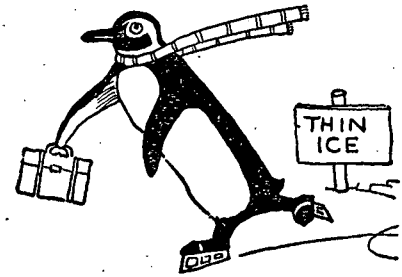
SAM SPADE

well-fed rotundity of the penguin? We give you Nero Wolfe, putting in his allotted time among his orchids before he goes downstairs to join Archie at the luncheon table, and you can bet there will be something pretty special today.

Scattergood Baines is a hearty penguin too, though now he is sitting on the porch outside his hardware store — naturally with his shoes off, so that he can wiggle his toes and think freely. Not far away Asey Mayo digs hopefully in the Cape Cod sands, looking for clues or perhaps for the makings of a luscious clam-pie. Penguins are very fond of sea food.

The Old Man in the Corner has finished his milk and cheesecake, and now sits (in a corner), endlessly knotting a piece of string. Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, the Thinking Machine, carefully adds up two and two and comes to a not-surprising total. But Reggie Fortune, chubby and gay as ever, amuses himself with one of his own marionettes before sipping his chocolate cream. Ellery Queen, more seriously bent, ponders his first editions, between precarious balancings on the high wire of Logic.

Mr. Tutt, still clinging to his stovepipe hat and stogie, strides through the snow toward the courthouse, with a brief-case full of torts and replevins. Another distinguished member of the legal profession, Perry Mason, skates



PERRY MASON

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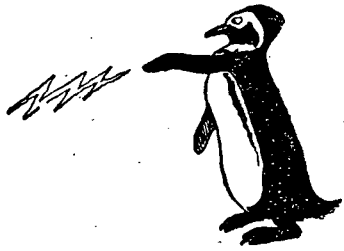
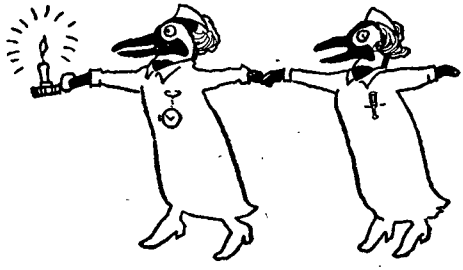


UNCLE ABNER

as usual on very thin ice indeed; a third, the one and only John J. Malone, celebrating the fact that he has never lost a client, takes a short rest on the mahogany of Joe the Angel's City Hall Bar.

Miss Pinkerton and Nurse Keate — muttering "Had we but known!" — again find themselves in some old dark house where the electricity has just mysteriously failed. Miss Hildegarde Withers sails forth wearing a headpiece which looks as though it had been designed by somebody who had heard of hats but had never actually seen one, ready to joust at windmills with her old cotton umbrella. And in the background Miss Marple, Miss Silver, and Jane Amanda Edwards sing a spinsterly chorus.

We dissolve (as they are always saying in Hollywood) to the paneled halls where Lord Peter Wimsey savors a cobwebbed port laid down in the girlhood of Honoria Lucasta, Dowager Duchess of Denver, and of course admires its ruby hue through a casually-held eyeglass. Outside in the street good old Max Carrados (né Wynn) taps his way along cautiously, as befits a blind man — but still with confident determination that he will get where he is going. Philo Vance takes the Regie cigarette from his beak long enough to devour another page from the encyclopedia and Prince Zaleski lounges on a tasseled velvet couch, sniffing what would be, if this were



MISS PINKERTON NURSE KEATE

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in Technicolor, a green carnation.

Color would also be a help in rendering justice to Dr. Thorndyke, who is at the moment wondering whether the dark purple precipitate in his test tube proves the existence of a new organic poison or whether Polton merely forgot to wash the laboratory glassware. More than color, indeed, would be necessary to illuminate properly the stroke of lightning emanating from Uncle Abner's outstretched flipper, or the brilliance of the flowers in the lei of welcome hung around Charlie Chan's neck on the occasion of his triumphant return to his native Honolulu.

MYCROFT

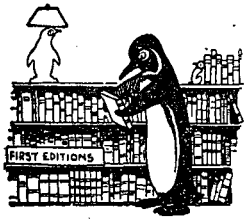
CHARLIE CHAN

THE SAINT

Simon Templar, self-canonized Saint, is about to make an evening of it, wearing full evening dress as all penguins do in public. He has, of course, a weather-eye cocked for a certain hen-penguin. Jimmie Lavender and The Lone Wolf, Gay Falcon and Bulldog Drummond are on the prowl too tonight.

NICK CARTER

Nick Carter, disguised to the teeth, is keeping a keen eye on some Dime-Novelish suspect, and Philo Gubb ponders the ways of evil-doers while he carefully slaps a strip of wallpaper into place. The one and only Sam Spade hews to the Private Eye line, letting the hips sway how they may, and somewhere behind him are Philip Marlowe and Ned Beaumont and The Continental Op and Pete Chambers — maybe even Bill Crane.



ELLERY QUEEN

SCATTERGOOD BAINES

All those, and a score more. But you see what I mean? They're all penguins — every one of 'em!

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Living in a New York City slum room, painting scenery at the Astor Theatre for a living, and writing feverishly through the cold-water stretches of the night, Jeffery Farnol, desperately homesick for his native England, finished his first novel, THE BROAD HIGHWAY *— and no American publisher would even look at it. Then his American wife sent the manuscript to her husband's native England where the book not only found a publisher but became an instantaneous bestseller. That was in 1910, and many, many stories have flowed from Mr. Farnol's typewriter since.*

An acknowledged master of Romance — with a capital R — Jeffery Farnol offers two short-short stories which will take you back to the Land of Nostalgia — two brief visits to The Cloak-and-Pistol School of our more carefree days. . . .

THE SHADOW

by JEFFERY FARNOL

SNOW was falling with a fitful, bitter wind, but the sanded parlor of the *Ring o' Bells* was warm and snug; upon a massy table beamed a shaded lamp; upon the wide hearth a fire crackled, a cheery fire whose dancing beams flickered upon divers pewter pots and rustic-gaitered legs. It glowed in Tom the Landlord's jolly face and upon the one spurred riding-boot of the traveler who sat, his other leg unbooted and swathed in bandages; a tallish, gentlemanly-seeming person, for his wig was modish like his braided coat, and he wore a sword.

"'Tis great wonder as you're alive, sir!" quoth Tom Fenn, the landlord, shaking solemn head. "Ah, great marvel it be as 'e ain't a-layin' out yonder a cold corpus, stiff, sir, and likewise stark!"

"Ar!" piped an ancient, nodding white head, "an' a-wallerin' in y'r gore, sir."

"Indeed," said the traveler, "I think it is. This particular highwayman is a desperate rogue, by all accounts."

"Desprit, sir?" cried Tom. "Ecod, nobody was never despriter nohow. Dick Turpin an' Jerry Abershaw was lams to 'e. You be th' ninth as 'e've stopped 'ereabouts this month — nine, sir! And two on 'em shot stone dead and five on 'em wounded! Desprit, sir — I should say so! A bloodthirsty rogue is the Shadder!"

"Why do you call him the Shadow?"

"'Cos nobody aren't never seen 'im fair, sir, or, as you might say, distinct, wot wi' his mask, an' 'is cloak, an' 'im so quick loike, an' 'is 'oss so fast. Happen now ye didn't see aught to reckernize when 'e stopped 'e tonight, sir?"

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"Only his hand," answered the traveler, staring dreamily into the fire: "his left hand, for a moment, in the light of my chaise lantern."

"But the Shadder allus goes gauntleted, sir: gloved, d'ye see?"

"Aye," nodded the traveler, "but the back of his gauntlet was torn open."

"Ah," sighed Tom, shaking his head, "but a man's 'and ain't much to go by, I reckon, sir."

"Did you send for the magistrate?" inquired the traveler, shifting his injured leg to a more easy position.

"Aye, I did, sir; my man Dick went for passon twenty minutes gone."

"The parson? But 'tis a magistrate I want, a justice —"

"Why, ye see, sir, Passon Golightly be the magistrate an' the justice an' the squire — passon be all three on 'em an' hisself into the bargain. An', ecod, there ain't a better passon, a juster magistrate, a kinder justice, or a better respected gentleman in all Sussex, nor nowheres else!"

The door swung open with a rush of wind and whirling snowflakes, and one appeared at whose advent the company rose in respectful greeting.

"Well, my lads," cried a hearty voice, "what's all this I'm hearing?" And, laying by hat and cloak, Parson, Justice, and Squire Golightly stepped up to the hearth: a smallish, comfortable-seeming gentleman in sober clerical black, but whose comely face, offset by its trim wig, was like the fire in that it was rosy, beaming, and cheerful.

"What's this Dick tells me," he inquired, warming his hands at the fire — "this tale o' roguery, of a gentleman robbed and shot into the bargain?"

"Sir," sighed the traveler, "I am that misfortunate person. A pistol ball through my leg, sir, but happily no bones are broke."

"Then, sir, if there is aught I can do to your comfort, pray command me."

"Your kindness touches me sensibly, sir, but I'm well enough, I thank you."

"Indeed and indeed," said the parson, taking the seat beside the fire Tom proffered him with smiling nod of thanks, "I rejoice to see you so well —"

"Faith," answered the traveler, gazing at the kindly parson with his somber eyes, "I hold myself singularly fortunate to be alive, for I invited death by snatching at the fellow's hand."

"Aha!" cried the parson eagerly. "'Twas bold, sir; 'twas heroic; 'twas noble! And then?"

"I took this bullet through my leg."

"And the fellow robbed you?"

"Yes, sir; he took my watch, my purse, my ring, the solitaire from my cravat, and a jewel of note, a stone called Siva's Heart, a ruby, sir, almost beyond price. He knew I carried this priceless gem, for 'twas this he demanded first, his pistol-muzzle within a foot o' my head."

"Heaven aid us!" cried the parson.

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"And the rascal is off and away?"

"'Twould seem so, sir, and yet I think mayhap his course is run; I think perchance he hath taken his last purse."

"How, sir, how?" cried Parson Golightly, leaning toward the speaker, his eyes bright and eager. "Can it be that you had the good fortune to see this elusive rogue, this phantom night rider? Ha, should you know him again?"

Once more all eyes stared at the traveler's impassive face as, with his thoughtful gaze upon the fire, he nodded.

"Indeed," he answered, "I venture to think I should."

"Now Heaven be praised!" cried the parson joyously, and leaped nimbly to his feet. "Speak, sir, speak his description and we will instantly set pursuers on his track, raise the hue and cry, rouse the country. Speak, I do conjure you — you saw his face?"

"Not a glimpse, sir!"

"Then how shall you know him, how discover the rogue?"

"I venture to think that Siva's Heart may tell us."

"But how so, sir, if 'twas stolen — you say the rascal took this gem?"

"Very true," nodded the traveler, "but pray be seated, sir, and I will explain. Know, then" — and here the speaker thrust both hands into coat pockets and leaning back in his chair surveyed the ring of eager faces — "that when I set out from London I bore a gold-mounted, leathern casket very proper to such an inestimably rare jewel, but in that casket was a worthless imitation."

"Aha!" cried the parson, and, clapping hands on knees, began to chuckle, began to laugh, and laughed till the place rang with his merriment, and others laughed too. "By Heaven, sir," he gasped at last, "'twas rarely done — 'twas a master stroke — ye bubbled the rogue mighty well. And where — where, then, is the true gem, the real Jewel?"

"Here, sir!" answered the traveler, and, taking off his bagwig, he undid the neat bow that tied it. Next moment there was a hoarse gasp of awed wonder, for in his open palm a great ruby flamed and glowed and sparkled. "Behold," said he, rolling it to and fro in scintillant splendor — "behold the Heart of Siva! Take it, sir; feel it; weigh in your palm the ransom of a king!" He tendered it to Parson Golightly, who had risen the better to view the transcendent glory of it. So the parson took it and, bending to the light, examined the marvel, turning it this way and that, while the traveler, leaning back in his chair, watched with his somber gaze.

"Red as blood, sir!" he murmured. "And bloody indeed it is! A treasure beyond price, a—"

The lamp crashed and was extinguished, and in this sudden gloom there was a scurry of rapid feet; the door swung wide to a blusterous, raving wind; then tumult — a wild hubbub. Presently a candle flamed and sputtered, to show the traveler entirely composed, staring somberly

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upon the fire, but with an imperious hand upraised.

"Silence!" he commanded. "Listen, masters all!"

A moment of breathless hush and then above the howling wind gusts the sudden sharp report of a shot, followed almost immediately by another and then another.

"Why," gasped Tom, "Lord love us, what —"

"Open the door!" said the traveler, turning himself in his chair. A muffled tramp of feet and two snowy figures staggered into the sanded parlor, bearing between them something that drooped and dangled, horribly inert.

"You have the ruby safe, Doremus?"

"Aye, sir; 'twas clutched fast in his left hand."

"Ah!" nodded the traveler. "That scarred left hand! Lay him down on the settee yonder."

A shuffle of feet, gasping breaths, a groan and then, sharp and loud in sudden horror, the voice of Tom Fenn, the landlord: "God. . . . God love us, 'tis our passon, neighbors, our passon —"

"Even so," sighed the traveler, gazing toward the fire again. "Your Parson Golightly by day, but by night — the Shadow. Cover him up, Doremus."

THE ROOK

by JEFFERY FARNOL

"VERY 'ot, it be," quoth Landlord John, mopping his rubicund visage.

"Ay, it is, John," answered little Parson Mildmay. "I trust it won't keep Sir Robert from our customary game."

"Not a 'ot day, sir! Fire nor flood wouldn't keep 'im away. I know 'im well, sir! Me, as seen him rally our broken line at Malplaquet, so bold and cool, when he lost his arm! And yonder 'e comes, I do b'lieve!" and away sped Landlord John as horse-hoofs clattered in the yard below; and very presently he was back again to usher in Sir Robert Madden, squire of Isfield, a big, hearty man who, tossing hat and riding-whip on the settle, flapped his empty right sleeve at Parson Mildmay in cheery greeting.

"How are ye, Will, man?" quoth he, clasping the little cleric's spare shoulder, affectionately. "Aha, the armies stand ready marshaled, I see," he laughed, gesturing towards the chess board. "Well, have at ye!"

He tugged at the bell-rope. "Mary lass," said he to the trim maid who answered, "ask the gentleman who

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rode in with me to walk upstairs. I know him not — I met him on the road," he added. "But he expressed a desire to watch our game."

And presently, with quick, light tread and jingle of spurs, a courteous stranger entered, a slim, neat man in Ramillie wig and laced coat, who bowed to each in turn, hat a-flourish.

"Gentlemen, I protest you're very kind!" said he, drawing up a chair as the others, bowing their acknowledgments, seated themselves at the table. "As an humble student of this great and ancient game, I thank you."

The game began. At once the Squire became fierce-eyed and tremendously grim, the Parson remained as mildly serene as ever, while the Stranger watched each move with an expression keenly alert, as the game progressed.

Presently the little Parson spoke:

"Sir Robert, my dear Bob, I give you checkmate!"

"Egad and checkmate it is, Will!" exclaimed the Squire.

The Stranger, keen gaze upon the pieces, hitched his chair a little nearer:

"Your pardon, sir," said he, "but had you brought up your knight —"

"Sir," cried the Squire, rising, "up and at it; take my seat, play him yourself and if you win, by George, we'll have a bottle to celebrate your victory, egad!"

"Sir," said the Stranger, taking the proffered chair with a certain eagerness, "I vow you're very kind!"

The pieces were set, the Parson and the Stranger bowed to each other, and began to play.

Move followed move in a hushed and expectant silence, until at last Sir Robert leaned back and chuckled:

"'Fore gad, Will, 'tis no blundering soldier thou'rt facing now!"

"Indeed, no, Bob!" murmured the little Parson, studying the pieces with his gentle, untroubled eyes. "'Tis desperate attack and I'm hard beset, still I do not despair," and he moved his Queen.

"Check, sir!" said the Stranger, instantly countering with a Bishop.

"How now, Will, man?" quoth the Squire. "He hath thee front and flank!"

"'Tis awkward situation, Bob, yet excellent game!"

And now was silence again while the battle raged — attack and counter-attack, cunning feints, bold advances, and masterly retreats. . . .

"Hey . . . Will . . ." gasped the Squire suddenly, "by heaven . . . thy Queen's lost, man!" The Parson nodded:

"'Twould seem so, Bob — ay, 'tis gone!" he sighed as the Stranger swept it from the board. "Ay, my Queen is no more, but" — his small hand moved the Castle, "I thus give — checkmate!"

A moment's breathless silence, the Stranger's chair fell crashing:

"Ha, the devil!" he exclaimed with a strange, wild look. "'Twas the Rook — the accursed Rook!" and he smote the board so violently that divers of the pieces leaped through the open

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lattice into the yard below. "Ha, by God, the curse is on me!" Then, snatching up hat and whip, "Gentlemen," said he in the same strange agitation, "I crave your pardon —"

"Sir," quoth the Squire, black brows knit across hawk-nose, "you ha' need . . . some explanation —"

"'Tis simple and mayhap you'll judge sufficiently foolish, sirs. I am a man o' desperate ventures . . . I am superstitious . . . it hath been foretold me . . . ah, I was warned . . . warned 'gainst the Rook!"

"Incredible folly, sir —"

"Sir, I pray it may prove so — farewell!" And with the word, he was gone; they heard a moment or so thereafter a wild gallop dying rapidly in distance.

"The gentleman would seem in desperate haste, Bob," quoth the little Parson, placid gaze upon the open lattice. "A something strange person! Yet he played notable good game. Had not my Queen lured him —"

"Hah, 'twas loss strategic, then?"

"Bob, even so!"

"Then faith, we'll crack a bottle; thou'rt mightier player e'en than I dreamed thee, Will." Reaching for the bell-rope, Sir Robert paused as from the road came sudden hubbub, loud voices . . . a noise of horses . . . and then, clear-ringing on the stilly evening air, a sharp report, followed by others in rapid succession.

"Pistol shots!" said the Squire.

Descending to the inn-yard they beheld a crowd of villagers, who, espying Sir Robert's tall, familiar presence, touched their hats, grinned, and stood aside, showing four sturdy fellows hauling between them a man, torn and bloody, in whom they recognized the polite Stranger.

"What's here?" demanded Sir Robert. "What do ye with this gentleman?"

"Gentleman, your honor?" cried one of the four with hoarse laugh. "This same fine gentleman be Cap'n Jasper, the Highwayman!"

"Eh — are ye sure?"

"As death, your honor. Knows 'is face, I do! Knows 'is hoss, I do — nothin' on four legs to catch his bay mare, but she went lame an' no wonder — caught in 'er hoof, jammed 'twixt shoe and frog was — this here!" and the speaker held up a Red Castle.

"So . . . you see — gentlemen," gasped the pallid captive, "the prophecy was . . . true! That accursed . . . Rook!"

SPECIAL BINDER OFFER

Because of the large number of reader requests, *ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE* has procured a supply of strong, handsome binders for your copies of *EQMM*. Each binder holds one complete volume — that is, six issues of the magazine. It is easy to use, handy, convenient, and economical. The price is $1.00 postpaid. Send your order and remittance to: Special Binder Dept., Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, 570 Lexington Ave., New York 22, New York.

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In his review of 55 SHORT STORIES FROM THE NEW YORKER (*Simon & Schuster*), *in "The New York Times Book Review" of October 23, 1949, Charles Poore (for whom our respect grows steadily) wrote as follows:*

"What do we ask of a short story? That it shall illuminate life as we know it? Yes; also life as we don't know it, thank God. We are also grateful if, for the time it takes to read it, a short story takes us into a world where we can behave well, or badly, as the case may be, and yet escape unscathed. Or think we have escaped unscathed, anyway."

Mr. Poore's remarks apply even more pointedly (and we might say, even more poignantly) to the short story of crime, mystery, or detection. Indeed, he might even have been writing about the detective-crime short story — in the same sense that Bertrand Russell had in mind when he said: "For my part, I find a sufficient outlet in detective stories" — an outlet for inner savage instincts, for unconscious primitive ferocity.

To get back to Mr. Poore, he might even have been writing about the short story we now bring to you — by C. S. Forester, of Hornblower fame and author of that superlative study in crime and conscience, PAYMENT DEFERRED.

BETWEEN EIGHT AND EIGHT

by C. S. FORESTER

AT LAST Manners was keenly interested in his game of chess. He bent forward over the board in an attitude of concentration. He wondered if his opponent would overlook the possibility of the position; that the advance of Manners's Queen's pawn one more square would not only attack a Knight but, by clearing the diagonal, would expose the King and his guard of Pawns to a formidable attack from Bishop as well as Rook and Queen. If his opponent should delay his counter-measure by as much as one single move he would be in a serious position; even if a quick mate did not ensue it would mean the loss of at least one piece.

But the man against whom Manners was playing was not of the type who overlooks things so important. After prolonged consideration he moved his Queen, and he moved her to the one square where she could wreak most destruction.

"Check," he said stolidly.

Manners stared at the board again. He had not paid enough consideration to this possibility. Now that the move was made he could see that it initiated an attack he could not stall off. The game was lost to him, inevitably and speedily. This new guard, who had been found for him by the warden of

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the prison in answer to his repeated irritated requests for someone who could really play chess, played much too well for him.

And as he stared at the board again, the clock of the parish church outside the prison wall struck once more.

First the four quarters, and then, with unctuous deliberation eight o'clock. Manners's heart throbbed painfully. Where would he be when that clock struck eight again? Manners knew; at least he knew where his limp body would be. He was filled with pettish rage about that clock. Surely the church authorities ought to stop the striking mechanism when they knew that a man lay in the condemned cell within such easy earshot of it.

He rose to his feet and turned away from the chessboard.

"I don't want to play any more," he said, and he knew as he said it that the tone of his voice was that of a spoiled child.

"All right," said the stolid guard. He displayed no annoyance at being thus deprived of a well-earned victory. He spoke indulgently. He could not be exacting with a man who had only twelve hours to live.

"What about a hand of crib?" asked the other guard, the lively one.

"To hell with you and your crib," said Manners, pacing about the cell.

The two guards exchanged glances. They had been expecting this. Manners had stood the strain of the three weeks of waiting well enough up to the present. That it had been a strain was obvious, for Manners's stubbly hair, once chestnut brown, was now white, had turned white in three weeks. But that was the only sign he had shown of the strain until now, until he began pacing round the cell, seven strides up, five across, seven down. Up — across — down — across, with his thoughts racing infinitely faster, but with as little chance of reaching a definite end. Up — across — down — across. The guards were only human after all. That restless pacing began to work on their nerves.

"What about the chaplain?" asked the lively guard. "Would you like to see him now?"

"To hell with the chaplain, too," said Manners, pacing on round the cell. The dreadful throbbing of his heart made his speech blurred and indistinct.

The guards reconciled themselves to the man's caged movements. Guards in a condemned cell, who spend every minute of a man's last three weeks on earth in the closest possible contact with him, must reconcile themselves to much.

But there came a blessed distraction. There was a jingling of keys outside; the door opened to admit the Warden, and then slammed to behind him. He was a man of slight, short figure, like Manners himself, dressed in a finely cut brown suit. Manners hated him; he had a long thin pink nose and a Hapsburg lip like the King of Spain's. Everyone was conscious of a momentary tension

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on the Warden's entrance, in case, just in case, he bore news of a reprieve. But one glance at his face was sufficient to determine that he did not.

"Well," said the Warden, "how's the chess going this time?"

"Rotten," said Manners, and turned his back. The Warden took the opportunity to ask the guards a question by means of a raised eyebrow; the guards replied in the negative with a shake of the head. Manners had neither offered to confess nor asked for the ministrations of the chaplain.

"Sorry about that," said the Warden to Manners. "What was the matter?"

"Matter?" said Manners, in a cracked hysterical voice. "Matter? Why — why ——"

He did not finish his sentence. There is hardly any need for a man who is to be hanged in the morning to explain why he cannot play chess well. The sound of the church clock striking the half-hour came in through the bars of the cell window to accentuate the point.

"Well, what about seeing the chaplain instead?" asked the Warden coaxingly. He spoke as one would to a fretful child, just as the guards had done. Manners eyed the Warden. That coaxing, indulgent tone maddened him. He had heard nothing else for three weeks. And not even to satisfy the consciences of the Warden, and of the hangman, too, for the matter of that, would he be seduced into making confession.

"I don't want to," he said sullenly.

With all the weight and majesty of the law turned upon him he could still be a rebel.

"Oh, come," said the Warden. "That's hardly fair on us, is it? Just think ——"

The thin pink nose fairly quivered with his earnestness as he pleaded for a confession. He mouthed out platitudes that Manners hardly heard; his attention was curiously distracted by that Hapsburg lip. But the Warden went on pleading, and Manners began to feel himself weaken. Three weeks in a condemned cell are bad for a man's strength of will. He felt himself being driven into a confession, and he did not want to confess. Especially he did not want to give any cause for satisfaction to the Warden. And the Warden went on talking, and Manners stared fascinated at that long Hapsburg lip.

"You see what I mean?" said the Warden.

"Oh, shut up," said Manners, and his irritation burst all bounds.

With a single stride forward he brought himself within effective range. As he came forward his right fist came up in an uppercut into which was compressed all the baffled rage which seethed within him. His fist landed on that long chin with a hard, clean smack which echoed sharply round the cell, and the Warden fell to the floor utterly stunned. Not for nothing had Manners been an amateur boxer of repute.

"'Ere, I say," said the lively guard.

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Both he and his stolid partner were on their feet in an instant. They sprang at Manners. The lively guard gripped him round the waist; the stolid guard tried to pinion his arms.

But Manners was too strong for them. Rage and desperation gave him a lunatic's strength. There was plenty of muscle in his slight form. He tore his arms free. One hand gripped the stolid guard by the back of the neck; the other arm held the lively guard pinioned. One fierce mad wrench achieved its object. The head of the stolid guard crashed against the head of the lively guard with a noise like two wooden boxes struck together. That one blow might have been sufficient, but Manners was too insane to check himself. He brought those unresisting heads together again and again, until his strength ebbed from him and he let the two limp forms fall to the ground.

Manners staggered back across the cell and surveyed the wreck he had made. The whole affair had only lasted a few seconds; and perhaps it was not more than two or three more before Manners recovered himself sufficiently to think clearly. Even then his first thought was that he was at last alone, comparatively speaking, for the first time for three weeks; that he could kill himself now and cheat the law if he wanted to — the very thing those two guards had been intended, all those three weeks, to prevent.

A slight movement of the Warden's unconscious body recalled him to action. A man cleanly knocked out, like the Warden, does not take long to recover. For a single split second Manners debated the point; whether he should give himself the not-very-satisfactory satisfaction of cheating the law, or whether he should make a wild attempt to escape.

The chances against escape were still enormous, he knew, but there was a chance, which was more than there had been five minutes ago. With a great effort he steadied himself, although he could not make his hands stop shaking — his heart was beating so fast that he trembled in every joint. But he thought clearly and fast; he was a born plotter and intriguer.

He bent over the Warden, and as the latter's mouth opened to utter the first groan of returning consciousness, he crammed his handkerchief in. Whipping the coarse cover from the long pillow of his bed he wound it round and round the Warden's head. He was about to bind the Warden's arms when he remembered and he tore off the Warden's coat and waistcoat first; it would have been impossible to have done this after tying the man's wrists together, and moreover he was now able to use his suspenders for the purpose.

Now that the Warden was bound, gagged, and helpless, Manners could spare time to attend to the guards; but a moment's examination assured him there was no need.

The two unfortunate men were still unconscious, and likely to re-

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main so. They might even die. Manners neither knew nor cared. He dragged off the Warden's shoes and trousers, and, moving deftly despite his trembling fingers, he dressed himself in the neat brown suit thus put at his disposal. Already the Warden was writhing a little over the floor, but he could make no sound, and it would be some time before he could get to his feet with his arms tied behind him.

In the Warden's pocket he found many things which would be useful. Money — a handful of loose change and a pound or two in notes in the pocketbook. And keys — half a dozen on a ring. The largest, Manners guessed, was the passkey to the cell door. Then there were two Yale keys. For a second Manners stood fingering these, deep in thought. But he had no time to spare. He must do his thinking while in action.

He had to brace himself again to open the cell door; every one of his actions after that must be made without a trace of hesitation. The big key opened the door; of course it would. He stepped out into the corridor with his heart pounding against his ribs. His mind was racing through a long series of mazed recollections. He tried to remember the entrance to the prison; he had seen it several times; when they had taken him out to his trial and when they had brought him back to die.

He had gone more than once to the chapel — he had gone there that very morning (today was Sunday) with a guard at each side of him. Most of all was he trying to remember one certain door in the wall of the long corridor in which he found himself. It was a door rather different from the cell and chapel doors. Once, as he was being led past it, the Warden had come through it, alone, shutting it behind him. It was the door into his private apartments, Manners was sure.

As he walked down the corridor he tried to call up before his mind's eye what he remembered of that door. He could remember the color of it; he could remember the brass knob. With a huge effort he assured himself that he had noticed the tiny brass plate which surrounded the small Yale keyhole. Another huge effort assured him that the keyhole was on the 'eft-hand side of the door — it would never do to hesitate in front of it.

One of the two Yale keys in his pocket would open it; he could not tell which. It would be a frightful risk to fumble, but it was a risk he must take. After all, it was an even chance. He put his hand in his pocket and gripped one of the keys ready. He thought, as he did so, that probably his life depended upon which key of those two chance guided into his fingers.

With such feverish rapidity had his mind worked that he had not taken more than half a dozen strides yet.

He was in the well-remembered long corridor badly lit with a series of

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electric bulbs at intervals along the wall. It was the ground floor, and the cell from which he had emerged was at the far end, convenient to the execution shed and the yard where he had walked for exercise, a guard on each side of him. But Manners was walking in the opposite direction, towards the entrance hall and the Warden's door.

Far down, at the very end, a guard sat on a chair looking towards him. But he was a long way off; Manners had much the same figure as the Warden's, and he wore the Warden's clothes. And the guard never thought for one moment that the man who was to die tomorrow at eight would be loose in the corridor and walking with a firm step towards him. And the light cast by the unshaded electric bulbs was harsh and deceptive.

Manners walked down towards him, past three empty cells, past the chapel doors. He stopped at the right moment outside the Warden's door. At the same instant he brought the key from his pocket and thrust it into the keyhole. For a heart-rending tenth of a second it would not turn. Then it yielded, and the door opened, and Manners stepped inside and closed the door quietly behind him.

He had never before been where he found himself now. It was a flagged hall with several doors. He flung an agonized glance round the place; his thumping heart leaped more painfully than ever when he caught sight of what was clearly the door into the street at the other end.

Even then he restrained himself sufficiently to look round for a hat and overcoat. But a woman's voice came from behind one of the doors.

"Is that you, George?"

There was no time to lose. He tiptoed across the hall, opened the front door, and passed through it into darkness and freedom, and shut it after him. It was raining terribly, and a cold wind blew, but he must not wait. He ran down the stone steps, and out through the gate to the pavement, where he hurried along, head down, shoulders bent.

There were few people about in such vile weather, and Manners regretted that he had not found a hat and overcoat — his lack of them would call attention to himself. Even as he reached this conclusion, catastrophe ensued. Fate, which had guided him well so far, ordained that it should be beside a street lamp that he should encounter a policeman.

The policeman, his cape glittering with moisture in the lamplight, looked curiously at the coatless figure hurrying by; Manners looked furtively from the corner of his eye at the policeman. He saw the policeman start with incredulous surprise at the first recognition, saw him hesitate, saw him decide, heard his voice calling him back.

Manners broke into a run. Five seconds later he heard the policeman's whistle blow. He ran madly, desperately. Behind him he still heard that remorseless whistle; the policeman, hampered with cape and

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greatcoat, could not hope to catch him on foot.

The prison entrance stood back from a main road — not so well lighted as usual, this being Sunday — and at the first opportunity Manners turned aside and plunged into a side street; racing down that, he turned corner after corner, his lungs bursting, his heart pounding.

It was a chase like those in a nightmare. Whistles seemed to be blowing everywhere. Once someone tried to seize him, but he tore himself free and pounded on. Luckily there were few people about in those quiet suburban by-streets in that awful weather. Stealing a glance over his shoulder he saw the lights of a motor car in pursuit — the headlights, dazzlingly bright, held him in their beam. He flung himself round another corner, and, with a mad, colossal effort, he leaped in his stride over the hedge and railings of a suburban front garden. Crouching behind the hedge in the pelting rain he saw the car tear past him; then he heard many running feet and voices.

"No 'at," panted someone to someone else as they ran by.

"No 'at? We'll find 'im all right."

Still Manners crouched in the garden; from the lighted, curtained windows behind him came music and laughter. The Sunday evening party in that little suburban house had remained unconscious of the mad pursuit outside.

Long after the last sound of pursuit had died away Manners rose stiffly to his feet. He was shuddering now with cold, and he was drenched with rain and sweat.

But the wait had given him time to plan his next move. He must find shelter and concealment. No hotel, no lodging-house, would offer him those without suspicion, dripping with wet as he was, without luggage, and (he strongly suspected) muddy with crouching in the mould of the front garden.

His wife? She would have gone away for certain, he knew not whither. Nor was he sure she would shelter him; on the contrary, he was nearly sure she would not. And now that the police knew of his escape the first place in which they would seek him would be at his wife's. There he could not go.

He decided almost automatically where he would seek refuge. He would go to Ethel's. The police had no knowledge of any connection between him and Ethel; nothing had come out about her at his trial — although, God knew, enough women had been dragged into that business. Manners, the born intriguer, had seen to it, from long before he was guilty of murder, that no one knew of their friendship, and he could rely upon Ethel not having made public her relationship with Manners, the murderer.

Ethel lived alone in rooms; Ethel had loved him — the first was a subtle result of the second. At Ethel's he would find rest and concealment. Extraordinarily fatigued, he began

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to walk stiffly through the remorseless rain to where Ethel lived.

He had now only a slight idea of where he was, because the prison was in a suburb with which he had but small acquaintance. But the suburb in which Ethel lived was on the same side of the river. He could probably make his way to it by keeping to the by-streets and steering in a general way eastwards. He was wet through, and excitement and his mad run had made him very tired — the three weeks of agony he had borne since his appeal was dismissed had not helped to keep him fit. But there was no chance of relaxation; not, that is to say, until he reached Ethel's.

Every footstep he heard struck terror into him; every other second he peered anxiously about for the menacing approach of a policeman. Time and time again he turned about in his tracks and made his way round some other corner because he saw people or policemen approaching him. The delays were irritating, but he could not risk passing people in the street, not at this late hour, hatless and coatless and muddy in the pelting rain.

He had to nerve himself to a fierce effort to cross the radial main roads as he encountered them, one after the other. His poor heart flogged away at his ribs; just that was enough to tire anyone, let alone this continual nervous strain and this walking — walking — walking through the dark streets and the pitiless rain. By now he could feel no emotion save that of fear. He felt neither elation nor hope.

He never thought once of the excited headlines which were being drawn up in a thousand newspaper offices, proclaiming his escape, and admitting that he was the first man in England to escape from the condemned cell since Jack Sheppard. All he could do was to tramp onwards, shaken by his pounding heart, peering continually about him.

It was a long, long walk to cross from West to East, but at last he began to reach a neighborhood which was familiar to him, and then he turned another corner and found himself in the suburban street where Ethel had her rooms. He reached the house and turned into the front yard, shutting the gate very, very quietly after him.

There he had to stop for a while, forcing his numbed brain to think clearly. He could not knock at the door. There could be no surer way of attracting attention to himself than by knocking at four in the morning at the door of an apartment house. Besides, it would not be Ethel who opened it.

He crept to the ground-floor front window and stared into the darkness there. Long and anxious peering at the shadowy shapes within assured him at last that the furniture there was familiar to him. Ethel still lived there; this was her sitting-room.

Her bedroom was the corresponding room at the back of the house — Manners knew that well; he knew, too, how the windows opened into

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the backyard. The house was semi-detached. He tried the side gate — so softly — but it was locked. Once more he nerved himself for an effort.

He stood and listened lest he could detect through the monotonous downpour of the rain the stealthy tread of a policeman's rubber-soled boot. He could hear nothing; bracing himself once more, he stretched his stiff limbs in a wild leap for the top of the gate. His fingers clutched it; then, with an effort which brought the sweat pouring from him in rivers, he dragged himself to the top, sprang over, and lowered himself to the ground on the other side.

He tiptoed down the dark passage to the back of the house. He had reached at last shelter and protection. Turning the corner, he crept into the yard, crept up to the window, and tapped at the pane. He leaned forward in utter exhaustion against the sill.

Ethel was in bed. She might even be said to be dozing. Hour after hour of that dreadful night she had turned back and forward in her bed. She had turned on the light and tried to read; dropping the book restlessly, she had turned off the light and tried to sleep unavailingly. She could not tear her thoughts away from the man who had to die next morning, the man in whose arms she had lain, who had wooed her with honey-sweet words.

Despite the coldness of the night her bed became fever-hot to her. The town-hall clock in the main road, tolling out remorselessly each passing quarter of an hour, sickened her each time she heard it. Not that she loved the man now. The reports of the trial had told her much about him that she had not known — not merely that he was a murderer (that she might have borne with) but that he was a married man and that there were other women in his life, so that she knew him now for the liar and cheat that he was and she hated him for it. But even that did not help her to sleep when she knew that at eight o'clock guards' arms would grasp the waist she had clasped, as they dragged him from the cell, and the hangman's rope would bruise and tear the neck she had kissed.

And yet, towards morning, she fell into a fevered, troubled doze, from which something roused her with a dreadful start. Someone was tapping on the pane of the window. She sat up in panic. Again there came the tapping at the window. Ethel was a brave woman; she flung off the bedclothes, snatched her flashlight, and approached the pane.

A shadowy shape was visible through the glass. Then she pressed the switch and saw the face. For a second she actually did not recognize him, for his hair was white now, and his face was marked with awful anxiety; he was so different from the dapper, self-confident Mr. Manners she had known. She stared dumbly at the vision.

Grimy, bloody hands pressed against the glass. The sagging mouth

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opened and shut, and the hands made pitiful gestures to her. She understood. She pushed up the sash quietly, and shrank back to the farther end of the room; the beam of the flashlight shone steadily on him.

Slowly, with infinite weariness, Manners hauled himself over the sill and half fell into the room; but he roused himself to close the window behind him before he turned and faced her.

"What do you want?" murmured Ethel; she spoke instinctively in a whisper.

Manners's answer was half a groan.

"Ethel!" he said, staggering blindly towards her.

But Ethel only shrank away.

"Keep back!" she said, and Manners stood still, drooping. Fatigue and anxiety had nearly done their work. But one last effort of the failing consciousness, one last flash of the intriguer's brain, told Manners what he had been fool enough to forget before. The old spell which had bound Ethel to him, which had made her subservient, had lost its power now.

Disappointment and dismay came to help fatigue and anxiety. His heart nearly failed him as he stood there, knees sagging, swaying on his feet.

"So you were married all the time?" said Ethel, bitterly.

Manners could only mumble unintelligibly in reply.

"Then, why don't you go to your wife for help?" asked Ethel. She hated him at that moment, hated him with an intensity which shook her as though in the grip of ague. But her hatred was not great enough to give her the strength to utter the scream which would bring her help and which would result in the arrival of brutal men, who would drag Manners away to the scaffold.

The bitter hostility in her tone completed the work which fatigue and anxiety had begun. Manners uttered a little moan and fell forward on his face, a senseless, motionless lump.

For a long time Ethel could only stand and gaze at him as he lay in the circle of light thrown by the flash. It was the striking of the town-hall clock which roused her. It struck the four quarters and then six o'clock. That reminder of the passage of time called her back to her senses.

She had no notion of how Manners had escaped, but she could picture the fevered search that was happening in the world outside. She could not think what to do; for the matter of that, she grimly realized, she did not know what she wanted to do. She could not bring herself to give Manners up, at the same time she did not want to be the instrument to save him. And her practical sense told her that it would be impossible for her to keep him concealed here in her rooms.

It was not until some time later that she realized that she was shuddering with cold. She dressed herself in the darkness, creeping quietly about the room. The usual early morning noises reached her from the outside.

Then she felt a sudden panic; per-

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haps the police had traced Manners here; they might already be quietly surrounding the house. She must go and see. She must get into the open to think. And when Manners recovered he would need food. Bread she could buy at the grocer's round the corner, who opened early; tea she would be able to make him over her gas ring here. She realized sadly that however much she hated Manners she could not deny him food. She put on her hat and her coat, and stooped over Manners's prostrate body.

"Dick," she whispered, but Manners did not answer. She shook him, but he made no movement. His clothes were wringing wet — a little pool of water had drained from them onto the floor. But his heart was still beating.

Ethel snatched the blankets from the bed and spread them over him. Then, very quietly, she opened the door, and, as a measure of precaution, she locked it after her. She crept out to the front door, unbolted it, and passed out into the street.

Her voice and her touch had done something towards rousing Manners. Some kind of consciousness began to creep back into his brain as he lay there on the floor. He was in a burning fever; already he was plunged into the semi-delirium of pneumonia. And in this delirium all accurate memory of the events of the previous evening was expunged. He had some confused recollection of a fight in his cell, of a wild flight through darkened streets, with remorseless pursuit hard at his heels. What Manners could remember of the night before was no more than he could remember of other nights. And then with a sudden start, with a hideous realization which set the fevered blood pulsing hot under his skin, he remembered that he was to die today. He remembered turning sharply round yesterday afternoon in his cell to see a strange face peering through the grating of the door — the hangman come to look at him, to observe his neck and guess his weight so that he might calculate what drop to allow.

Manners moaned again; the faintest of lights that winter morning was beginning to creep in through the windows. Then he heard the clock strike; four quarters and then — and then — seven o'clock. This was the hour when they would rouse him to make a pretense at breakfast before they dragged him out to the shed in the yard which he had observed when taking exercise. He heard the rattle of a key in the lock; it would be the Warden coming in. For a moment he tried to struggle, but his frantically beating heart could stand the strain no longer.

Ethel, entering, found her problem solved for her.

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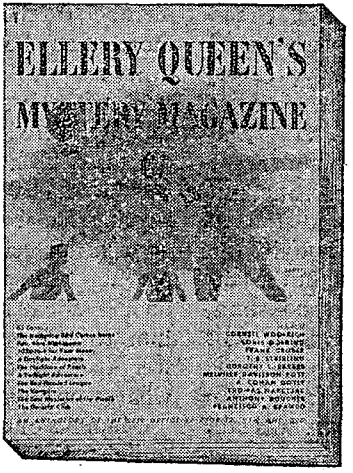
Winner of EQMM's March Cover Contest

TECHNICAL FOUL

by DALE BURGESS



SOMEWHERE on the scene of nearly every sports event, there's usually a dentist — a linesman at a football game, a judge at a prizefight, a committeeman at a golf tournament, a referee at a basketball game. And he goes back to his muted clients and he talks and talks and talks and talks. . . .

"Hurt?" asked the little red-haired dentist.

The big, chunky man in the chair had his mouth full of rubber dam. He shook his head.

"Afraid it might," Doc Roche said cheerfully. "The slogan is 'See your dentist twice a year,' friend — not twice a century. You're lucky I could squeeze you in without an appointment."

Doc Roche patted briskly at a little mound of amalgam.

"As I was saying, I've worked a lot of basketball games, but that affair last night is one for the books. You've seen the newspapers?"

Another negative shake from the patient.

"Well, 'Stretch' Olson of State was shot down — all seven feet of him — just as he started to lay up what would have been the winning basket. Score was 52-all, with about two seconds left to play. In the uproar, the killer ran out of a side door and disappeared in the parking lot . . . Open wider, please . . . Some gambler, probably. People get pretty wrought up at basketball games, anyway. And this guy probably had a chunk of dough riding with Pulnym University. State's just so-so, except Olson."

Doc Roche finished smoothing the filling and pulled out the dam.

"You may rinse now."

The patient was glad to. "Who win?" he grunted, settling back.

"Nobody, yet," Doc said. "Who won didn't seem very important last night. The umpire — that was Al Thomas — and I decided to talk it

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over with the coaches and conference president this afternoon."

He ground on a molar, squirted cold water into the excavation. The big man flinched.

"Rinse . . . Well, my first thought was they'd have to play it over — like that Purdue-Wisconsin game where the bleachers collapsed a couple of years ago. Probably what the killer thought, too. Anyway, last night, the timer's gun went off like the echo of the killer's. The regular playing time was ended, but the game really wasn't over — tie, you know. Normally, there would have been an overtime period."

Doc concentrated on grinding a minute.

"Look's like a playover, eh? But there's a gimmick. And I'm going to take the profit out of that shooting. You see, State wouldn't have a prayer against Pulnym without Olson. They won't need him, though, because that game's going to be finished without Pulnym touching the ball . . . Rinse . . . I'm going to call a technical foul against the crowd for that shooting! Yes, sir! Captain Billy Switzer of State can go down to the empty gym with Al Thomas and me and shoot the free throw. He's no George Mikan from the field, but he has missed just two free throws this season . . . Sorry. That hurt, didn't it? . . . Yes, sir, it's the first time I ever enjoyed calling a technical foul, and I'll tell you why. Rule 10, Section 6, provides for calling a technical foul on any team follower if he 'disrespectfully' addresses an official or opponent. Of course, there's nothing in the rules about shooting. But when this maniac jumped onto the edge of the hardwood and fired, he called Olson a blankety goon. Shouted it, in fact. That's disrespectful. So State gets a free throw."

"Why, you lyin' little punk," the big man raged out of the chair, "I didn't say a blasted thing!"

"Probably unethical," Doc Roche told the homicide squad, "but the combination of a fast drill and cold water had him hating me. Being casual about the pain didn't make him love me, either. He couldn't shut up when I sprung that lie about him.

"When he came in without an appointment, I wondered if he was impatient about his teeth — or if he was impatient about what we'd decide about the game. He pretended he hadn't heard about the affair, but most people would have asked whether Olson was killed, or just wounded — unless they had seen the blood spurt from his heart. This guy was only interested in whether or not it was a 'bets off' game.

"Men don't let their teeth get that bad unless they're physical cowards or hard up. He was no coward. He needed to win — bad.

"The technical foul? He was disrespectful to the referee, wasn't he?"

See list of Honorable Mentions on page 80

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A brilliant short-short story by the author of S.S. SAN PEDRO (*a Book-of-the-Month Club selection*), THE JUST AND THE UNJUST (*also a Book-of-the-Month Club selection*), THE LAST ADAM (*filmed with Will Rogers as a Connecticut small-town doctor*), *and* GUARD OF HONOR (*Pulitzer Prize winner*). *Gilbert K. Chesterton would have chortled with glee had he read this tiny 'tec tale — we can just see the prodigious paunch heaving with merriment . . .*

CLERICAL ERROR

by JAMES GOULD COZZENS

THERE were three steps down from the street door. Then the store extended, narrow and low between the book-packed walls, sixty or seventy feet to a little cubbyhole of an office where a large sallow man worked under a shaded desk-lamp. He had heard the street door open, and he looked that way a moment, peering intently through his spectacles. Seeing only a thin, stiffly erect gentleman with a small cropped white mustache, standing hesitant before the table with the sign *Any Book 50 Cents*, he returned to the folded copy of a religious weekly on the desk in front of him. He looked at the obituary column again, pulled a pad toward him and made a note. When he had finished, he saw, upon looking up again, that the gentleman with the white mustache had come all the way down the store.

"Yes, sir?" he said, pushing the papers aside. "What can I do for you?"

The gentleman with the white mustache stared at him keenly. "I am addressing the proprietor, Mr. Joreth?" he said.

"Yes, sir. You are."

"Quite so. My name is Ingalls — Colonel Ingalls."

"I'm glad to know you, Colonel. What can I —"

"I see that the name does not mean anything to you."

Mr. Joreth took off his spectacles, looked searchingly. "Why, no, sir. I am afraid not. Ingalls. No. I don't know anyone by that name."

Colonel Ingalls thrust his stick under his arm and drew an envelope from his inner pocket. He took a sheet of paper from it, unfolded the sheet, scowled at it a moment, and tossed it onto the desk. "Perhaps," he said, "this will refresh your memory."

Mr. Joreth pulled his nose a moment, looked harder at Colonel Ingalls, replaced his spectacles. "Oh," he said, "a bill. Yes. You must excuse me. I do much of my business by mail with people I've never met personally. 'The Reverend Doctor Godfrey In-

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galls, Saint John's Rectory.' Ah, yes, yes —"

"The late Doctor Ingalls was my brother. This bill is obviously an error. He would never have ordered, received, or wished to read any of these works. Naturally, no such volumes were found among his effects."

"Hm," said Mr. Joreth. "Yes, I see." He read down the itemized list, coughed, as though in embarrassment. "I see. Now, let me check my records a moment." He dragged down a vast battered folio from the shelf before him. "*G, H, I* —" he muttered. "*Ingalls.* Ah, now —"

"There is no necessity for that," said Colonel Ingalls. "It is, of course, a mistake. A strange one, it seems to me. I advise you strongly to be more careful. If you choose to debase yourself by surreptitiously selling works of the sort, that is your business. But —"

Mr. Joreth nodded several times, leaned back. "Well, Colonel," he said, "you're entitled to your opinion. I don't sit in judgment on the tastes of my customers. Now, in this case, there seems unquestionably to have been an order for the books noted from the source indicated. On the fifteenth of last May I filled the order. Presumably they arrived. What became of them, then, is no affair of mine; but in view of your imputation, I might point out that such literature is likely to be kept in a private place and read privately. For eight successive months I sent a statement. I have never received payment. Of course, I was unaware that the customer was, didn't you say, deceased. Hence my reference to legal action on this last. I'm very sorry to have —"

"You unmitigated scoundrel!" roared Colonel Ingalls. "Do you really mean definitely to maintain that Doctor Ingalls purchased such books? Let me tell you —"

Mr. Joreth said: "My dear sir, one moment, if you please! Are you in a position to be so positive? I imply nothing about the purchaser. I mean to maintain nothing, except that I furnished goods, for which I am entitled to payment. I am a poor man. When people do not pay me, what can I do but —"

"Why, you infamous —"

Mr. Joreth held up his hand. "Please, please!" he protested. "I think you are taking a most unjust and unjustified attitude, Colonel. This account has run a long while. I've taken no action. I am well aware of the unpleasantness which would be caused for many customers if a bill for books of this sort was made public. The circumstances aren't by any means unique, my dear sir; a list of my confidential customers would no doubt surprise you."

Colonel Ingalls said carefully: "Be good enough to show me my brother's original order."

"Ah," said Mr. Joreth. He pursed his lips. "That's unfair of you, Colonel. You are quite able to see that I wouldn't have it. It would be the utmost imprudence for me to keep on file anything which could cause so

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much trouble. I have the carbon of an invoice, which is legally sufficient, under the circumstances, I think. You see my position."

"Clearly," said Colonel Ingalls. "It is the position of a dirty knave and a blackguard, and I shall give myself the satisfaction of thrashing you." He whipped the stick from under his arm. Mr. Joreth slid agilely from his seat, caught the telephone off the desk, kicking a chair into the Colonel's path.

"Operator," he said, "I want a policeman." Then he jerked open a drawer, plucked a revolver from it. "Now, my good sir," he said, his back against the wall, "we shall soon see. I have put up with a great deal of abuse from you, but there are limits. To a degree I understand your provocation, though it doesn't excuse your conduct. If you choose to take yourself out of here at once and send me a check for the amount due me, we will say no more."

Colonel Ingalls held the stick tight in his hand. "I think I will wait for the officer," he said with surprising composure. "I was too hasty. In view of your list of so-called customers, which you think would surprise me, there are doubtless other people to be considered —"

The stick in his hand leaped, sudden and slashing, catching Mr. Joreth over the wrist. The revolver flew free, clattered along the floor, and Colonel Ingalls kicked it behind him. "It isn't the sort of thing the relatives of a clergyman would like to have made public, is it? When you read of the death of one, what is to keep you from sending a bill? Very often they must pay and shut up. A most ingenious scheme, sir."

Mr. Joreth clasped his wrist, wincing. "I am at loss to understand this nonsense," he said. "How dare you —"

"Indeed?" said Colonel Ingalls. "Ordinarily, I might be at loss myself, sir; but in this case I think you put your foot in it, sir! I happen to be certain that my late brother ordered no books from you, that he did not keep them in private or read them in private. It was doubtless not mentioned in the obituary, but for fifteen years previous to his death Doctor Ingalls had the misfortune to be totally blind. . . . There, sir, is the policeman you sent for."

Note on March Cover Contest

Owing to the high quality of their entries in *EQMM*'s March Cover Contest, the following were awarded Honorable Mentions:

Harry Miner, Takoma Park, Md.
Robert L. Zimmler, Jamaica, N. Y.
R. B. Rohweller, Vallejo, Calif.
David Vincent Sheehan, Elmira, N. Y.

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JOHN DICKSON CARR SELECTS . . .

Which are the twelve best detective short stories ever written? . . . You will recall that we asked a Blue Ribbon Jury of experts to select the crème de la *crime, the best of all time, among all the detective shorts written in the last 109 years. This Private-I Poll represented the considered judgment of James Hilton, Howard Haycraft, John Dickson Carr, Anthony Boucher, Vincent Starrett, James Sandoe, August Derleth, Viola Brothers Shore, Lee Wright, Lew D. Feldman, Charles Honce, and your Editors — representing craftsmen, critics, and connoisseurs, editors, bookdealers, and readers. The final concensus of opinion, arrived at by a point-system of voting, bestowed the Laurel Wreath of Ratiocination on the following twelve tales —* THE GOLDEN DOZEN:

The Hands of Mr. Ottermole . . . by Thomas Burke
The Purloined Letter . . . . . by Edgar A. Poe
The Red-Headed League . . . . . by A. Conan Doyle
The Avenging Chance . . . . . by Anthony Berkeley
The Absent-Minded Coterie . . . . by Robert Barr
The Problem of Cell 13 . . . . . by Jacques Futrelle
The Oracle of the Dog . . . . . by G. K. Chesterton
Naboth's Vineyard . . . . . by Melville Davisson Post
The Gioconda Smile . . . . . by Aldous Huxley
The Yellow Slugs . . . . . by H. C. Bailey
The Genuine Tabard . . . . . by E. C. Bentley
Suspicion . . . . . by Dorothy L. Sayers

This month we bring you Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13," sponsored by John Dickson Carr. As in the case of previous sponsors, Mr. Carr requires no introduction to readers of EQMM. One of the most famous detective-story writers of our time, if not of all time — and one of the most popular (fame and popularity are not always synonymous) — John Dickson Carr has created two memorable detectives: Sir Henry Merrivale (H. M.), that blend of John Bull-and-Winston Churchill, and Dr. Gideon Fell, so obviously patterned after the immortal GKC. Mr. Carr has an absolute passion for the detective story — for reading it, studying it, and writing it — and few of his waking hours are not dedicated almost exclusively to this pursuit of happiness; indeed, we often wonder if Mr. Carr's sleeping hours are not similarly devoted to dreaming up new locked rooms and new ways of unlocking them.

They say that clothes make the man. Your Editors have never believed in that axiom — character, not clothes, makes the man. But in a detective-

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story sense, it can be said that reading taste makes the man. Tell us what detective stories a man likes best, and we'll tell you what manner of man he is. John Dickson Carr's personal list of favorite detective short stories delineates both the man and the writer. Basically, Mr. Carr asks only three things of detective stories: that they be well-written, that they be brilliantly ingenious, and that they play absolutely fair with the reader. Only three things — but that 'tec triumvirate represents the consummate criminological code.

Here are Mr. Carr's candidates for all-time honors:

The Problem of Cell 13	by Jacques Futrelle
The Hands of Mr. Ottermole	by Thomas Burke
Murders in the Rue Morgue	by Edgar A. Poe
Silver Blaze	by A. Conan Doyle
The Avenging Chance	by Anthony Berkeley
The Man in the Passage	by G. K. Chesterton
The Great Cipher	by Melville Davisson Post
Mind Over Matter	by Ellery Queen
Chinoiserie	by Helen McCloy
The Thing Invisible	by William Hope Hodgson
Blue Murder	by Wilbur Daniel Steele
Human Interest Stuff	by Brett Halliday

Mr. Carr's sponsorship of Jacques Futrelle's "The Problem of Cell 13" is another poetic example of "the luck of the draw." For Mr. Carr has said in print that he considers The Thinking Machine's chef-d'oeuvre *one of four detective short stories which share "the honours for supreme untouchable top-notch excellence."*

THE PROBLEM OF CELL 13

by JACQUES FUTRELLE

PRACTICALLY all those letters remaining in the alphabet after Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen was named were afterward acquired by that gentleman in the course of a brilliant scientific career, and, being honorably acquired, were tacked on to the other end. His name, therefore, taken with all that belonged to it, was a wonderfully imposing structure.

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He was a Ph.D., and LL.D., an F.R.S., an M.D., and an M.D.S. He was also some other things — just what, he himself couldn't say — through recognition of his ability by various foreign educational and scientific institutions.

In appearance he was no less striking than in nomenclature. He was slender, with the droop of the student in his thin shoulders and the pallor of a close, sedentary life on his clean-shaven face. His eyes wore a perpetual, forbidding squint — the squint of a man who studies little things — and when they could be seen at all through his thick spectacles, were mere slits of watery blue. But above his eyes was his most striking feature. This was a tall, broad brow, almost abnormal in height and width, crowned by a heavy shock of bushy, yellow hair. All these things conspired to give him a peculiar, almost grotesque, personality.

Professor Van Dusen was remotely German. For generations his ancestors had been noted in the sciences; he was the logical result, the master mind. First and above all, he was a logician. At least thirty-five years of the half century or so of his existence had been devoted exclusively to proving that two and two always equal four — not *some* time but *all* the time. He stood broadly on the general proposition that all things that start must go somewhere, and was able to bring the concentrated mental force of his forefathers to bear on a given problem. Incidentally, it may be remarked that Professor Van Dusen wore a No. 8 hat.

The world at large had heard vaguely of Professor Van Dusen as The Thinking Machine. It was a newspaper catch-phrase applied to him at the time of a remarkable exhibition at chess; he had demonstrated then that a stranger to the game might, by the force of inevitable logic, defeat a champion who had devoted a lifetime to its study. The Thinking Machine! Perhaps that more nearly described him than all his honorary initials, for he spent week after week, month after month, in the seclusion of his small laboratory from which had gone forth thoughts that staggered scientific associates and deeply stirred the world at large.

It was only occasionally that The Thinking Machine had visitors, and these were usually men who, themselves high in the sciences, dropped in to argue a point and perhaps convince themselves. Two of these men, Dr. Charles Ransome and Alfred Fielding, called one evening to discuss some theory which is not of consequence here.

"Such a thing is impossible," declared Dr. Ransome emphatically, in the course of the conversation.

"Nothing is impossible," declared The Thinking Machine with equal emphasis. He always spoke petulantly. "The mind is master of all things. When science fully recognizes that fact a great advance will have been made."

Dr. Ransome laughed tolerantly.

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"I've heard you say such things before," he said. "But they mean nothing. Mind may be master of matter, but it hasn't yet found a way to apply itself. There are some things that can't be *thought* out of existence, or rather which would not yield to any amount of thinking."

"What, for instance?" demanded The Thinking Machine.

Dr. Ransome was thoughtful for a moment as he smoked.

"Well, say prison walls," he replied. "No man can *think* himself out of a cell. If he could, there would be no prisoners."

"A man can so apply his brain and ingenuity that he can leave a cell, which is the same thing," snapped The Thinking Machine.

Dr. Ransome was slightly amused.

"Let's suppose a case," he said, after a moment. "Take a cell where prisoners under sentence of death are confined — men who are desperate and, maddened by fear, would take any chance to escape. Suppose you were locked in such a cell. Could you escape?"

"Certainly," declared The Thinking Machine.

"Of course," said Mr. Fielding, who entered the conversation for the first time, "you might wreck the cell with an explosive — but inside, a prisoner, you couldn't have that."

"There would be nothing of that kind," said The Thinking Machine. "You might treat me precisely as you treated prisoners under sentence of death, and I would leave the cell."

"Not unless you entered it with tools prepared to get out," said Dr. Ransome.

The Thinking Machine was visibly annoyed and his blue eyes snapped.

"Lock me in any cell in any prison anywhere at any time, wearing only what is necessary, and I'll escape in a week," he declared, sharply.

Dr. Ransome sat up straight in the chair, interested. Mr. Fielding lighted a new cigar.

"You mean you could actually *think* yourself out?" asked Dr. Ransome.

"I would get out," was the response.

"Are you serious?"

"Certainly I am serious."

Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding were silent for a long time.

"Would you be willing to try it?" asked Mr. Fielding, finally.

"Certainly," said Professor Van Dusen, and there was a trace of irony in his voice. "I have done more asinine things than that to convince other men of less important truths."

The tone was offensive and there was an undercurrent strongly resembling anger on both sides. Of course it was an absurd thing, but Professor Van Dusen reiterated his willingness to undertake the escape and it was decided upon.

"To begin now," added Dr. Ransome.

"I'd prefer that it begin tomorrow," said The Thinking Machine, "because ——"

"No, now," said Mr. Fielding,

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flatly. "You are arrested — figuratively, of course; without any warning you are locked in a cell with no chance to communicate with friends, and left there with identically the same care and attention that would be given to a man under sentence of death. Are you willing?"

"All right, now, then," said The Thinking Machine, and he arose.

"Say, the death cell in Chisholm Prison."

"The death cell in Chisholm Prison."

"And what will you wear?"

"As little as possible," said The Thinking Machine. "Shoes, stockings, trousers, and a shirt."

"You will permit yourself to be searched, of course?"

"I am to be treated precisely as all prisoners are treated," said The Thinking Machine. "No more attention and no less."

There were some preliminaries to be arranged in the matter of obtaining permission for the test, but all three were influential men and everything was done satisfactorily by telephone, although the prison commissioners, to whom the experiment was explained on purely scientific grounds, were sadly bewildered. Professor Van Dusen would be the most distinguished prisoner they had ever entertained.

When The Thinking Machine had donned those things which he was to wear during his incarceration, he called the little old woman who was his housekeeper, cook, and maid-servant all in one.

"Martha," he said, "it is now twenty-seven minutes past nine o'clock. I am going away. One week from tonight, at half past nine, these gentlemen and one, possibly two, others will take supper with me here. Remember Dr. Ransome is very fond of artichokes."

The three men were driven to Chisholm Prison, where the warden was awaiting them, having been informed of the matter by telephone. He understood merely that the eminent Professor Van Dusen was to be his prisoner, if he could keep him, for one week; that he had committed no crime, but that he was to be treated as all other prisoners were treated.

"Search him," instructed Dr. Ransome.

The Thinking Machine was searched. Nothing was found on him; the pockets of the trousers were empty; the white, stiff-bosomed shirt had no pocket. The shoes and stockings were removed, examined, then replaced. As he watched all these preliminaries, and noted the pitiful, childlike physical weakness of the man, the colorless face, and the thin, white hands, Dr. Ransome almost regretted his part in the affair.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Would you be convinced if I did not?" inquired The Thinking Machine in turn.

"No."

"All right. I'll do it."

What sympathy Dr. Ransome had was dissipated by the tone. It nettled

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him, and he resolved to see the experiment to the end; it would be a stinging reproof to egotism.

"It will be impossible for him to communicate with anyone outside?" he asked.

"Absolutely impossible," replied the warden. "He will not be permitted writing materials of any sort."

"And your jailers, would they deliver a message from him?"

"Not one word, directly or indirectly," said the warden. "You may rest assured of that. They will report anything he might say or turn over to me, anything he might give them."

"That seems entirely satisfactory," said Mr. Fielding, who was frankly interested in the problem.

"Of course, in the event he fails," said Dr. Ransome, "and asks for his liberty, you understand you are to set him free?"

"I understand," replied the warden.

The Thinking Machine stood listening, but had nothing to say until this was all ended, then:

"I should like to make three small requests. You may grant them or not, as you wish."

"No special favors, now," warned Mr. Fielding.

"I am asking none," was the stiff response. "I should like to have some tooth powder — buy it yourself to see that it is tooth powder — and I should like to have one five-dollar and two ten-dollar bills."

Dr. Ransome, Mr. Fielding, and the warden exchanged astonished glances. They were not surprised at the request for tooth powder, but were at the request for money.

"Is there any man with whom our friend would come in contact that he could bribe with twenty-five dollars?"

"Not for twenty-five hundred dollars," was the positive reply.

"Well, let him have them," said Mr. Fielding. "I think they are harmless enough."

"And what is the third request?" asked Dr. Ransome.

"I should like to have my shoes polished."

Again the astonished glances were exchanged. This last request was the height of absurdity, so they agreed to it. These things all being attended to, The Thinking Machine was led back into the prison from which he had undertaken to escape.

"Here is Cell 13," said the warden, stopping three doors down the steel corridor. "This is where we keep condemned murderers. No one can leave it without my permission; and no one in it can communicate with the outside. I'll stake my reputation on that. It's only three doors back of my office and I can readily hear any unusual noise."

"Will this cell do, gentlemen?" asked The Thinking Machine. There was a touch of irony in his voice.

"Admirably," was the reply.

The heavy steel door was thrown open, there was a great scurrying and scampering of tiny feet, and The Thinking Machine passed into the gloom of the cell. Then the door was

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closed and double-locked by the warden.

"What is that noise in there?" asked Dr. Ransome, through the bars.

"Rats — dozens of them," replied The Thinking Machine, tersely.

The three men, with final good-nights, were turning away when The Thinking Machine called:

"What time is it exactly, Warden?"

"Eleven seventeen," replied the warden.

"Thanks. I will join you gentlemen in your office at half past eight o'clock one week from tonight," said The Thinking Machine.

"And if you do not?"

"There is no 'if' about it."

Chisholm Prison was a great, spreading structure of granite, four stories in all, which stood in the center of acres of open space. It was surrounded by a wall of solid masonry eighteen feet high, and so smoothly finished inside and out as to offer no foothold to a climber, no matter how expert. Atop of this wall, as a further precaution, was a five-foot fence of steel rods, each terminating in a keen point. This fence in itself marked an absolute deadline between freedom and imprisonment, for, even if a man escaped from his cell, it would seem impossible for him to pass the wall.

The yard, which on all sides of the prison building was twenty-five feet wide, that being the distance from the building to the wall, was by day an exercise ground for those prisoners to whom was granted the boon of occasional semi-liberty. But that was not for those in Cell 13. At all times of the day there were armed guards in the yard, four of them, one patrolling each side of the prison building.

By night the yard was almost as brilliantly lighted as by day. On each of the four sides was a great arc light which rose above the prison wall and gave to the guards a clear sight. The lights, too, brightly illuminated the spiked top of the wall. The wires which fed the arc lights ran up the side of the prison building on insulators and from the top story led out to the poles supporting the arc lights.

All these things were seen and comprehended by The Thinking Machine, who was only enabled to see out his closely barred cell-window by standing on his bed. This was on the morning following his incarceration. He gathered, too, that the river lay over there beyond the wall somewhere, because he heard faintly the pulsation of a motor boat and high up in the air saw a river bird. From that same direction came the shouts of boys at play and the occasional crack of a batted ball. He knew then that between the prison wall and the river was an open space, a playground.

Chisholm Prison was regarded as absolutely safe. No man had ever escaped from it. The Thinking Machine, from his perch on the bed, seeing what he saw, could readily understand why. The walls of the cell, though built twenty years before,

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were perfectly solid, and the window bars of new iron had not a shadow of rust on them. The window itself, even with the bars out, would be a difficult mode of egress because it was small.

Yet, seeing these things, The Thinking Machine was not discouraged. Instead, he thoughtfully squinted at the great arc light — there was bright sunlight now — and traced with his eyes the wire which led from it to the building. That electric wire, he reasoned, must come down the side of the building not a great distance from his cell. That might be worth knowing.

Cell 13 was on the same floor with the offices of the prison — that is, not in the basement, nor yet upstairs. There were only four steps up to the office floor, therefore the level of the floor must be only three or four feet above the ground. He couldn't see the ground directly beneath his window, but he could see it farther out toward the wall. It would be an easy drop from the window. Well and good.

Then The Thinking Machine fell to remembering how he had come to the cell. First, there was the outside guard's booth, a part of the wall. There were two heavily barred gates there, both of steel. At this gate was one man always on guard. He admitted persons to the prison after much clanking of keys and locks, and let them out when ordered to do so. The warden's office was in the prison building, and in order to reach that official from the prison yard one had to pass a gate of solid steel with only a peephole in it. Then coming from that inner office to Cell 13, one must pass a heavy wooden door and two steel doors into the corridors of the prison; and always there was the double-locked door of Cell 13 to reckon with.

There were then, The Thinking Machine recalled, seven doors to be overcome before one could pass from Cell 13 into the outer world, a free man. But against this was the fact that he was rarely interrupted. A jailer appeared at his cell door at six in the morning with a breakfast of prison fare; he would come again at noon, and again at six in the afternoon. At nine o'clock at night would come the inspection tour. That would be all.

"It's admirably arranged, this prison system," was the mental tribute paid by The Thinking Machine. "I'll have to study it a little when I get out. I had no idea there was such great care exercised in the prisons."

There was nothing, positively nothing, in his cell, except his iron bed, so firmly put together that no man could tear it to pieces save with a sledge or a file. He had neither of these. There was not even a chair, or a small table, or a bit of tin or crockery. Nothing! The jailer stood by when he ate, then took away the wooden spoon and bowl which he had used.

One by one these things sank into the brain of The Thinking Machine. When the last possibility had been considered he began an examination of his cell. From the ceiling, down the

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walls on all sides, he examined the stones and the cement between them. He stamped over the floor carefully time after time, but it was cement, perfectly solid. After the examination he sat on the edge of the iron bed and was lost in thought for a long time. For Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, The Thinking Machine, had something to think about.

He was disturbed by a rat, which ran across his foot, then scampered away into a dark corner of the cell, frightened at its own daring. After a while The Thinking Machine, squinting steadily into the darkness of the corner where the rat had gone, was able to make out in the gloom many little beady eyes staring at him. He counted six pair, and there were perhaps others; he didn't see very well.

Then The Thinking Machine, from his seat on the bed, noticed for the first time the bottom of his cell door. There was an opening there of two inches between the steel bar and the floor. Still looking steadily at this opening, The Thinking Machine backed suddenly into the corner where he had seen the beady eyes. There was a great scampering of tiny feet, several squeaks of frightened rodents, and then silence.

None of the rats had gone out the door, yet there were none in the cell. Therefore, there must be another way out of the cell, however small. The Thinking Machine on hands and knees, started a search for this spot, feeling in the darkness with his long, slender fingers.

At last his search was rewarded. He came upon a small opening in the floor, level with the cement. It was perfectly round and somewhat larger than a silver dollar. This was the way the rats had gone. He put his fingers deep into the opening; it seemed to be a disused drainage pipe.

Having satisfied himself on this point, he sat on the bed again for an hour, then made another inspection of his surroundings through the small cell-window. One of the outside guards stood directly opposite, beside the wall, and happened to be looking at the window of Cell 13 when the head of The Thinking Machine appeared. But the scientist didn't notice the guard.

Noon came and the jailer appeared with the prison lunch of plain food. At home The Thinking Machine merely ate to live; here he took what was offered without comment. Occasionally, he spoke to the jailer who stood outside the door watching him.

"Any improvements made here in the last few years?" he asked.

"Nothing particularly," replied the jailer. "New wall was built four years ago."

"Anything done to the prison proper?"

"Painted the woodwork outside, and I believe about seven years ago a new system of plumbing was put in."

"Ah!" said the prisoner. "How far is the river over there?"

"About three hundred feet. The boys have a baseball ground between the wall and the river."

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The Thinking Machine had nothing further to say just then, but when the jailer was ready to go he asked for some water.

"I get very thirsty here," he explained. "Would it be possible for you to leave a little water in a bowl for me?"

"I'll ask the warden," replied the jailer, and he went away.

Half an hour later he returned with water in a small earthen bowl.

"The warden says you may keep this bowl," he informed the prisoner. "But you must show it to me when I ask for it. If it is broken, it will be the last."

"Thank you," said The Thinking Machine. "I won't break it."

The jailer went on about his duties. For just the fraction of a second it seemed that The Thinking Machine wanted to ask a question, but he didn't.

Two hours later this same jailer, in passing the door of Cell No. 13, heard a noise inside and stopped. The Thinking Machine was down on his hands and knees in a corner of the cell, and from that same corner came several frightened squeaks. The jailer looked on interestedly.

"Ah, I've got you," he heard the prisoner say.

"Got what?" he asked, sharply.

"One of these rats," was the reply. "See?" And between the scientist's long fingers the jailer saw a small gray rat struggling. The prisoner brought it over to the light and looked at it closely.

"It's a water rat," he said.

"Ain't you got anything better to do than to catch rats?" asked the jailer.

"It's disgraceful that they should be here at all," was the irritated reply. "Take this one away and kill it. There are dozens more where it came from."

The jailer took the wriggling, squirmy rodent and flung it down on the floor violently. It gave one squeak and lay still. Later he reported the incident to the warden, who only smiled.

Still later that afternoon the outside armed guard on the Cell 13 side of the prison looked up again at the window and saw the prisoner looking out. He saw a hand raised to the barred window and then something white fluttered to the ground, directly under the window of Cell 13. It was a little roll of linen, evidently of white shirting material, and tied around it was a five-dollar bill. The guard looked up at the window again, but the face had disappeared.

With a grim smile he took the little linen roll and the five-dollar bill to the warden's office. There together they deciphered something which was written on it with a queer sort of ink, frequently blurred. On the outside was this:

Finder of this please deliver to Dr. Charles Ransome.

"Ah," said the warden, with a chuckle. "Plan of escape number one has gone wrong." Then, as an afterthought: "But why did he address it to Dr. Ransome?"

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"And where did he get the pen and ink to write with?" asked the guard.

The warden looked at the guard and the guard looked at the warden. There was no apparent solution of that mystery. The warden studied the writing carefully, then shook his head.

"Well, let's see what he was going to say to Dr. Ransome," he said at length, still puzzled, and he unrolled the inner piece of linen.

"Well, if that — what — what do you think of that?" he asked, dazed.

The guard took the bit of linen and read this: —

Epa cseot d'net niiy awe htto n'si sih. T.

The warden spent an hour wondering what sort of cipher it was, and half an hour wondering why his prisoner should attempt to communicate with Dr. Ransome, who was the cause of his being there. After this the warden devoted some thought to the question of where the prisoner got writing materials, and what sort of writing materials he had. With the idea of illuminating this point, he examined the linen again. It was a torn part of a white shirt and had ragged edges.

Now it was possible to account for the linen, but what the prisoner had used to write with was another matter. The warden knew it would have been impossible for him to have either pen or pencil, and, besides, neither pen nor pencil had been used in this writing. What, then? The warden decided to investigate personally. The Thinking Machine was his prisoner; he had orders to hold his prisoners; if this one sought to escape by sending cipher messages to persons outside, he would stop it, as he would have stopped it in the case of any other prisoner.

The warden went back to Cell 13 and found The Thinking Machine on his hands and knees on the floor, engaged in nothing more alarming than catching rats. The prisoner heard the warden's step and turned to him quickly.

"It's disgraceful," he snapped, "these rats. There are scores of them."

"Other men have been able to stand them," said the warden. "Here is another shirt for you — let me have the one you have on."

"Why?" demanded The Thinking Machine, quickly. His tone was hardly natural, his manner suggested actual perturbation.

"You have attempted to communicate with Dr. Ransome," said the warden severely. "As my prisoner, it is my duty to put a stop to it."

The Thinking Machine was silent for a moment.

"All right," he said, finally. "Do your duty."

The warden smiled grimly. The prisoner arose from the floor and removed the white shirt, putting on instead a striped convict shirt the warden had brought. The warden took the white shirt eagerly, and then and there compared the pieces of linen on which was written the cipher with certain torn places in the shirt. The

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Thinking Machine looked on curiously.

"The guard brought *you* those, then?" he asked.

"He certainly did," replied the warden triumphantly. "And that ends your first attempt to escape."

The Thinking Machine watched the warden as he, by comparison, established to his own satisfaction that only two pieces of linen had been torn from the white shirt.

"What did you write this with?" demanded the warden.

"I should think it a part of your duty to find out," said The Thinking Machine, irritably.

The warden started to say some harsh things, then restrained himself and made a minute search of the cell and of the prisoner instead. He found absolutely nothing; not even a match or toothpick which might have been used for a pen. The same mystery surrounded the fluid with which the cipher had been written. Although the warden left Cell 13 visibly annoyed, he took the torn shirt in triumph.

"Well, writing notes on a shirt won't get him out, that's certain," he told himself with some complacency. He put the linen scraps into his desk to await developments. "If that man escapes from that cell I'll — hang it — I'll resign."

On the third day of his incarceration The Thinking Machine openly attempted to bribe his way out. The jailer had brought his dinner and was leaning against the barred door, when The Thinking Machine began:

"The drainage pipes of the prison lead to the river, don't they?" he asked.

"Yes," said the jailer.

"I suppose they are very small."

"Too small to crawl through, if that's what you're thinking about," was the grinning response.

There was silence until The Thinking Machine finished his meal. Then: "You know I'm not a criminal, don't you?"

"Yes."

"And that I've a perfect right to be freed if I demand it?"

"Yes."

"Well, I came here believing that I could make my escape," said the prisoner, and his squint eyes studied the face of the jailer. "Would you consider a financial reward for aiding me to escape?"

The jailer, who happened to be an honest man, looked at the slender, weak figure of the prisoner, at the large head with its mass of yellow hair, and was almost sorry.

"I guess prisons like these were not built for the likes of you to get out of," he said, at last.

"But would you consider a proposition to help me get out?" the prisoner insisted, almost beseechingly.

"No," said the jailer, shortly.

"Five hundred dollars," urged The Thinking Machine. "I am not a criminal."

"No," said the jailer.

"A thousand?"

"No," said the jailer, and he started away hurriedly to escape further

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temptation. Then he turned back. "If you should give me ten thousand dollars I couldn't get you out. You'd have to pass through seven doors, and I only have the keys to two."

Then he told the warden all about it.

"Plan number two fails," said the warden, smiling grimly. "First a cipher, then bribery."

When the jailer was on his way to Cell 13 at six o'clock, again bearing food to The Thinking Machine, he paused, startled by the unmistakable scrape, scrape of steel against steel. It stopped at the sound of his steps, then craftily the jailer, who was beyond the prisoner's range of vision, resumed his tramping, the sound being apparently that of a man going away from Cell 13. As a matter of fact, he was in the same spot.

After a moment there came again the steady scrape, scrape, and the jailer crept cautiously on tiptoes to the door and peered between the bars. The Thinking Machine was standing on the iron bed working at the bars of the little window. He was using a file, judging from the backward and forward swing of his arms.

Cautiously the jailer crept back to the office, summoned the warden in person, and they returned to Cell 13 on tiptoes. The steady scrape was still audible. The warden listened to satisfy himself and then suddenly appeared at the door.

"Well?" he demanded, and there was a smile on his face.

The Thinking Machine glanced back from his perch on the bed and leaped suddenly to the floor, making frantic efforts to hide something. The warden went in, with hand extended.

"Give it up," he said.

"No," said the prisoner, sharply.

"Come, give it up," urged the warden. "I don't want to have to search you again."

"No," repeated the prisoner.

"What was it — a file?" asked the warden.

The Thinking Machine was silent and stood squinting at the warden with something very nearly approaching disappointment on his face — nearly, but not quite. The warden was almost sympathetic.

"Plan number three fails, eh?" he asked, good-naturedly. "Too bad, isn't it?"

The prisoner didn't say anything.

"Search him," instructed the warden.

The jailer searched the prisoner carefully. At last, artfully concealed in the waistband of the trousers, he found a piece of steel about two inches long, with one side curved like a half moon.

"Ah," said the warden, as he received it from the jailer. "From your shoe heel," and he smiled pleasantly.

The jailer continued his search and on the other side of the trousers waistband found another piece of steel identical with the first. The edges showed where they had been worn against the bars of the window.

"You couldn't saw a way through

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those bars with these," said the warden.

"I could have," said The Thinking Machine firmly.

"In six months, perhaps," said the warden, good-naturedly.

The warden shook his head slowly as he gazed into the slightly flushed face of his prisoner.

"Ready to give it up?" he asked.

"I haven't started yet," was the prompt reply.

Then came another exhaustive search of the cell. Carefully the two men went over it, finally turning out the bed and searching that. Nothing. The warden in person climbed upon the bed and examined the bars of the window where the prisoner had been sawing. When he looked he was amused.

"Just made it a little bright by hard rubbing," he said to the prisoner, who stood looking on with a somewhat crestfallen air. The warden grasped the iron bars in his strong hands and tried to shake them. They were immovable, set firmly in the solid granite. He examined each in turn and found them all satisfactory. Finally he climbed down from the bed.

"Give it up, Professor," he advised.

The Thinking Machine shook his head and the warden and jailer passed on again. As they disappeared down the corridor The Thinking Machine sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands.

"He's crazy to try to get out of that cell," commented the jailer.

"Of course he can't get out," said the warden. "But he's clever. I would like to know what he wrote that cipher with."

It was four o'clock next morning when an awful, heart-racking shriek of terror resounded through the great prison. It came from a cell, somewhere about the center, and its tone told a tale of horror, agony, terrible fear. The warden heard and with three of his men rushed into the long corridor leading to Cell 13.

As they ran, there came again that awful cry. It died away in a sort of wail. The white faces of prisoners appeared at cell doors upstairs and down, staring out wonderingly.

"It's that fool in Cell 13," grumbled the warden.

He stopped and stared in as one of the jailers flashed a lantern. "That fool in Cell 13" lay comfortably on his cot, flat on his back with his mouth open, snoring. Even as they looked there came again the piercing cry, from somewhere above. The warden's face blanched a little as he started up the stairs. There on the top floor he found a man in Cell 3, directly above Cell 13, but two floors higher, cowering in a corner of his cell.

"What's the matter?" demanded the warden.

"Thank God you've come," exclaimed the prisoner, and he cast himself against the bars of his cell.

"What is it?" demanded the warden again.

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He threw open the door and went in. The prisoner dropped on his knees and clasped the warden about the body. His face was white with terror, his eyes were widely distended, and he was shuddering. His hands, icy cold, clutched at the warden's.

"Take me out of this cell, please take me out," he pleaded.

"What's the matter with you, anyhow?" insisted the warden.

"I heard something — something," said the prisoner, and his eyes roved nervously around the cell.

"What did you hear?"

"I — I can't tell you," stammered the prisoner. Then, in a sudden burst of terror: "Take me out of this cell — put me anywhere — but take me out of here."

The warden and the three jailers exchanged glances.

"Who is this fellow? What's he accused off?" asked the warden.

"Joseph Ballard," said one of the jailers. "He's accused of throwing acid in a woman's face. She died from it."

"But they can't prove it," gasped the prisoner. "They can't prove it. Please put me in some other cell."

He was still clinging to the warden, and that official threw his arms off roughly. Then for a time he stood looking at the cowering wretch, who seemed possessed of all the wild, unreasoning terror of a child.

"Look here, Ballard," said the warden, finally, "if you heard anything, I want to know what it was. Now tell me."

"I can't, I can't," was the reply. He was sobbing.

"Where did it come from?"

"I don't know. Everywhere — nowhere. I just heard it."

"What was it — a voice?"

"Please don't make me answer," pleaded the prisoner.

"You must answer," said the warden, sharply.

"It was a voice — but — but it wasn't human," was the sobbing reply.

"Voice, but not human?" repeated the warden, puzzled.

"It sounded muffled and — and far away — and ghostly," explained the man.

"Did it come from inside or outside the prison?"

"It didn't seem to come from anywhere — it was just here, there, everywhere. I heard it. I heard it."

For an hour the warden tried to get the story, but Ballard had become suddenly obstinate and would say nothing — only pleaded to be placed in another cell, or to have one of the jailers remain near him until daylight. These requests were gruffly refused.

"And see here," said the warden, in conclusion, "if there's any more of this screaming I'll put you in the padded cell."

Then the warden went his way, a sadly puzzled man. Ballard sat at his cell door until daylight, his face, drawn and white with terror, pressed against the bars, and looked out into the prison with wide, staring eyes.

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That day, the fourth since the incarceration of The Thinking Machine, was enlivened considerably by the volunteer prisoner, who spent most of his time at the little window of his cell. He began proceedings by throwing another piece of linen down to the guard, who picked it up dutifully and took it to the warden. On it was written:

Only three days more.

The warden was in no way surprised at what he read; he understood that The Thinking Machine meant only three days more of his imprisonment, and he regarded the note as a boast. But how was the thing written? Where had The Thinking Machine found this new piece of linen? Where? How? He carefully examined the linen. It was white, of fine texture — shirting material. He took the shirt which he had taken and carefully fitted the two original pieces of the linen to the torn places. This third piece was entirely superfluous; it didn't fit anywhere, and yet it was unmistakably the same goods.

"And where — where does he get anything to write with?" demanded the warden of the world at large.

Still later on the fourth day The Thinking Machine, through the window of his cell, spoke to the armed guard outside.

"What day of the month is it?" he asked.

"The fifteenth," was the answer.

The Thinking Machine made a mental astronomical calculation and satisfied himself that the moon would not rise until after nine o'clock that night. Then he asked another question:

"Who attends to those arc lights?"

"Man from the company."

"You have no electricians in the buildings?"

"No."

"I should think you could save money if you had your own man."

"None of my business," replied the guard.

The guard noticed The Thinking Machine at the cell window frequently during that day, but always the face seemed listless and there was a certain wistfulness in the squint eyes behind the glasses. After a while he accepted the presence of the leonine head as a matter of course. He had seen other prisoners do the same thing; it was the longing for the outside world.

That afternoon, just before the day guard was relieved, the head appeared at the window again, and The Thinking Machine's hand held something out between the bars. It fluttered to the ground and the guard picked it up. It was a five-dollar bill.

"That's for you," called the prisoner.

As usual, the guard took it to the warden. That gentleman looked at it suspiciously; he looked at everything that came from Cell 13 with suspicion.

"He said it was for me," explained the guard.

"It's a sort of tip, I suppose," said the warden. "I see no particular reason why you shouldn't accept ——"

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Suddenly he stopped. He had remembered that The Thinking Machine had gone into Cell 13 with one five-dollar bill and two ten-dollar bills — twenty-five dollars in all. Now a five-dollar bill had been tied around the first piece of linen that came from the cell. The warden still had it, and to convince himself he took it out and looked at it. It was five dollars; yet here was *another five-dollar bill*, and The Thinking Machine had only had two ten-dollar bills left.

"Perhaps somebody changed one of the bills for him," he thought at last, with a sigh of relief.

But then and there he made up his mind. He would search Cell 13 as a cell was never before searched in this world. When a man could write at will, and change money, and do other wholly inexplicable things, there was something radically wrong with his prison. He planned to enter the cell at night — three o'clock would be an excellent time. The Thinking Machine must do all the weird things he did sometime. Night seemed the most reasonable.

Thus it happened that the warden stealthily descended upon Cell 13 that night at three o'clock. He paused at the door and listened. There was no sound save the steady, regular breathing of the prisoner. The keys unfastened the double-locks with scarcely a clank, and the warden entered, locking the door behind him. Suddenly he flashed his dark lantern in the face of the recumbent figure.

If the warden had planned to startle The Thinking Machine he was mistaken, for that individual merely opened his eyes quietly, reached for his glasses and inquired, in a most matter-of-fact tone:

"Who is it?"

It would be useless to describe the search that the warden made. It was minute. Not one inch of the cell or the bed was overlooked. He found the round hole in the floor, and with a flash of inspiration thrust his thick fingers into it. After a moment of fumbling there he drew up something and looked at it in the light of his lantern.

"Ugh!" he exclaimed.

The thing he had taken out was a rat — a dead rat. His inspiration fled as a mist before the sun. But he continued the search. The Thinking Machine, without a word, arose and kicked the rat out of the cell.

The warden climbed on the bed and tried the steel bars in the tiny window. They were perfectly rigid; every bar of the door was the same.

Then the warden searched the prisoner's clothing, beginning at the shoes. Nothing hidden in them. Then the trousers waistband. Still nothing. Then the pockets of the trousers. From one side he drew out some paper money and examined it.

"Five one-dollar bills!" he gasped.

"That's right," said the prisoner.

"But the — you had two tens and a five — what the — how do you do it?"

"That's my business," said The Thinking Machine.

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"Did any of my men change this money for you — on your word of honor?"

The Thinking Machine paused just a fraction of a second.

"No," he said.

The warden glared at the eminent scientist fiercely. He felt — he knew — that this man was making a fool of him, yet he didn't know how. If he were a real prisoner he would get the truth — but, then, perhaps, those inexplicable things which had happened would not have been brought before him so sharply. Neither of the men spoke for a long time, then suddenly the warden turned fiercely and left the cell, slamming the door behind him. He didn't dare to speak.

He glanced at the clock. It was ten minutes to four. He had hardly settled himself in bed when again came that heart-breaking shriek through the prison. With a few muttered words, which, while not elegant, were highly expressive, he relighted his lantern and rushed through the prison again to the cell on the upper floor.

Again Ballard was crushing himself against the steel door, shrieking at the top of his voice. He stopped only when the warden flashed his lamp in the cell.

"Take me out, take me out!" he screamed. "I did it, I did it, I killed her! Take it away!"

"Take what away?" asked the warden.

"I threw the acid in her face — I did it — I confess. Take me out of here."

Ballard's condition was pitiable; it was only an act of mercy to let him out into the corridor. There he crouched in a corner, like an animal at bay, and clasped his hands to his ears. It took half an hour to calm him sufficiently for him to speak. Then he told incoherently what had happened. On the night before at four o'clock he had heard a voice — a sepulchral voice, muffled and wailing in tone.

"What did it say?" asked the warden, curiously.

"Acid — acid — acid!" gasped the prisoner. "It accused me. Acid! I threw the acid, and the woman died. Oh!" It was a long, shuddering wail of terror.

"Acid?" echoed the warden, puzzled. The case was beyond him.

"Acid. That's all I heard — that one word, repeated several times. There were other things, too, but I didn't hear them."

"That was last night, eh?" asked the warden. "What happened tonight — what frightened you just now?"

"It was the same thing," gasped the prisoner. "Acid — acid — acid!" He covered his face with his hands and sat shivering. "It was acid I used on her, but I didn't mean to kill her. I just heard the words. It was something accusing me — accusing me."

"Did you hear anything else?"

"Yes — but I couldn't understand — only a little bit — just a word or two."

"Well, what was it?"

"I heard 'acid' three times, then I heard a long, moaning sound, then — then — I heard 'No. 8 hat.' "

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"No. 8 hat," repeated the warden. "What the devil — No. 8 hat?"

"He's insane," said one of the jailers, with an air of finality.

"I believe you," said the warden. "He must be. He probably heard something and got frightened. No 8 hat! What the ——"

When the fifth day of The Thinking Machine's imprisonment rolled around the warden was wearing a hunted look. He was anxious for the end of the thing. He could not help but feel that his distinguished prisoner had been amusing himself. And if this were so, The Thinking Machine had lost none of his sense of humor. For on this fifth day he flung down another linen note to the outside guard, bearing the words: *Only two days more.* Also he flung down half a dollar.

Now the warden knew — he *knew* — that the man in Cell 13 didn't have any half-dollars — he *couldn't* have any half-dollars, no more than he could have pen and ink and linen. And yet he did have them. It was a condition, not a theory.

That ghastly, uncanny thing, too, about "Acid" and "No. 8 hat" clung to him tenaciously. They didn't mean anything, of course, merely the ravings of an insane murderer who had been driven by fear to confess his crime; still there were so many things that "didn't mean anything" happening in the prison now since The Thinking Machine was there.

On the sixth day the warden received a postal stating that Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding would be at Chisholm Prison on the following evening, Thursday, and in the event Professor Van Dusen had not yet escaped — and they presumed he had not because they had not heard from him — they would meet him there.

"In the event he had not yet escaped!" The warden smiled grimly. Escaped!

The Thinking Machine enlivened this day for the warden with three notes. They were on the usual linen and bore generally on the appointment at half past eight o'clock Thursday night, which appointment the scientist had made at the time of his imprisonment.

On the afternoon of the seventh day the warden passed Cell 13 and glanced in. The Thinking Machine was lying on the iron bed, apparently sleeping lightly. The cell appeared precisely as it always did to a casual glance. The warden would swear that no man was going to leave it between that hour — it was then four o'clock — and half past eight o'clock that evening.

On his way back past the cell the warden heard the steady breathing again, and coming close to the door looked in. He wouldn't have done so if The Thinking Machine had been looking, but now — well, it was different.

A ray of light came through the high window and fell on the face of the sleeping man. It occurred to the warden for the first time that his

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prisoner appeared haggard and weary. Just then The Thinking Machine stirred slightly and the warden hurried on up the corridor guiltily. That evening after six o'clock he saw the jailer.

"Everything all right in Cell 13?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," replied the jailer. "He didn't eat much, though."

It was with a feeling of having done his duty that the warden received Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding shortly after seven o'clock. He intended to show them the linen notes and lay before them the full story of his woes, which was a long one. But before this came to pass the guard from the river side of the prison yard entered the office.

"The arc light in my side of the yard won't light," he informed the warden.

"Confound it, that man's a hoodoo," thundered the official. "Everything has happened since he's been here."

The guard went back to his post in the darkness, and the warden phoned the electric company.

"This is Chisholm Prison," he said. "Send some men down here quick to fix an arc light."

The reply was evidently satisfactory, for the warden hung up the receiver and passed out into the yard. While Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding sat waiting the guard at the outer gate came in with a special delivery letter. Dr. Ransome happened to notice the address, and, when the guard went out, looked at the letter more closely.

"By George!" he exclaimed.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Fielding.

Silently the doctor offered the letter. Mr. Fielding examined it closely.

"Coincidence," he said. "It must be."

It was nearly eight o'clock when the warden returned to his office. The electricians had arrived in a wagon, and were now at work. The warden pressed the buzz-button communicating with the man at the outer gate in the wall.

"How many electricians came in?" he asked. "Four? Three workmen in jumpers and overalls and the manager? Frock coat and silk hat? All right. Be certain that only four go out. That's all."

He turned to Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding.

"We have to be careful here — particularly," and there was broad sarcasm in his tone, "since we have scientists locked up."

The warden picked up the special delivery letter carelessly, and then began to open it.

"When I read this I want to tell you gentlemen something about how —— Great Caesar!" he ended, suddenly, as he glanced at the letter. He sat with mouth open, motionless, from astonishment.

"What is it?" asked Mr. Fielding.

"A special delivery letter from Cell 13," gasped the warden. "An invitation to supper."

"What?" and the two others arose.

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The warden sat dazed, staring at the letter for a moment, then called sharply to a guard outside in the corridor.

"Run down to Cell 13 and see if that man's in there."

The guard went as directed, while Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding examined the letter.

"It's Van Dusen's handwriting; there's no question of that," said Dr. Ransome. "I've seen too much of it."

Just then the buzz on the telephone from the outer gate sounded, and the warden picked up the receiver.

"Hello! Two reporters, eh? Let 'em come in." He turned suddenly to the doctor and Mr. Fielding. "Why, the man *can't* be out! He must be in his cell!"

Just at that moment the guard returned.

"He's still in his cell, sir," he reported. "I saw him. He's lying down."

"There, I told you so," said the warden, and he breathed freely again. "But how did he mail that letter?"

There was a rap on the steel door which led from the jail yard into the warden's office.

"It's the reporters," said the warden. "Let them in," he instructed the guard; then to the two other gentlemen: "Don't say anything about this before them, because I'd never hear the last of it."

The door opened, and the two men from the front gate entered.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said one. That was Hutchinson Hatch; the warden knew him well.

"Well?" demanded the other, irritably. "I'm here."

That was The Thinking Machine.

He squinted belligerently at the warden, who sat with mouth agape. For the moment that official had nothing to say. Dr. Ransome and Mr. Fielding were amazed, but they didn't know what the warden knew. They were only amazed; he was paralyzed. Hutchinson Hatch, the reporter, took in the scene with greedy eyes.

"How — how — how did you do it?" gasped the warden, finally.

"Come back to the cell," said The Thinking Machine, in the irritated voice which his scientific associates knew so well.

The warden, still in a condition bordering on trance, led the way.

"Flash your light in there," directed The Thinking Machine.

The warden did so. There was nothing unusual in the appearance of the cell, and there — there on the bed lay the figure of The Thinking Machine. Certainly! There was the yellow hair! Again the warden looked at the man beside him and wondered at the strangeness of his own dreams.

With trembling hands he unlocked the cell door and The Thinking Machine passed inside.

"See here," he said.

He kicked at the steel bars in the bottom of the cell door and three of of them were pushed out of place. A fourth broke off and rolled away in the corridor.

"And here, too," directed the erstwhile prisoner as he stood on the

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bed to reach the small window. He swept his hand across the opening and every bar came out.

"What's this in bed?" demanded the warden.

"A wig," was the reply. "Turn down the cover."

The warden did so. Beneath it lay a large coil of strong rope, thirty feet or more; a dagger; three files; ten feet of electric wire; a thin, powerful pair of steel pliers; a small tack hammer with its handle; and — and a derringer pistol.

"How did you do it?" demanded the warden.

"You gentlemen have an engagement to dine with me at half past nine o'clock," said The Thinking Machine. "Come on, or we shall be late."

"But how did you do it?" insisted the warden.

"Don't ever think you can hold any man who can use his brain," said The Thinking Machine. "Come on; we shall be late."

It was an impatient supper party in the rooms of Professor Van Dusen and a somewhat silent one. The guests were Dr. Ransome, Alfred Fielding, the warden, and Hutchinson Hatch, reporter. The meal was served to the minute, in accordance with Professor Van Dusen's instructions of one week before; Dr. Ransome found the artichokes delicious. At last the supper was finished and The Thinking Machine turned full on Dr. Ransome and squinted at him fiercely.

"Do you believe it now?" he demanded.

"I do," replied Dr. Ransome.

"Do you admit that it was a fair test?"

"I do."

With the others, particularly the warden, he was waiting anxiously for the explanation.

"Suppose you tell us how ——" began Mr. Fielding.

"Yes, tell us how," said the warden.

The Thinking Machine readjusted his glasses, took a couple of preparatory squints at his audience, and began the story. He told it from the beginning logically; and no man ever talked to more interested listeners.

"My agreement was," he began, "to go into a cell, carrying nothing except what was necessary to wear, and to leave that cell within a week. I had never seen Chisholm Prison. When I went into the cell I asked for tooth powder, two ten- and one five-dollar bills, and also to have my shoes blacked. Even if these requests had been refused it would not have mattered seriously. But you agreed to them.

"I knew there would be nothing in the cell which you thought I might use to advantage. So when the warden locked the door on me I was apparently helpless, unless I could turn three seemingly innocent things to use. They were things which would have been permitted any prisoner under sentence of death, were they not, warden?"

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"Tooth powder and polished shoes, yes, but not money," replied the warden.

"Anything is dangerous in the hands of a man who knows how to use it," went on The Thinking Machine. "I did nothing that first night but sleep and chase rats." He glared at the warden. "When the matter was broached I knew I could do nothing that night, so suggested next day. You gentlemen thought I wanted time to arrange an escape with outside assistance, but this was not true. I knew I could communicate with whom I pleased, when I pleased."

The warden stared at him a moment, then went on smoking solemnly.

"I was aroused next morning at six o'clock by the jailer with my breakfast," continued the scientist. "He told me lunch was at twelve and supper at six. Between these times, I gathered, I would be pretty much to myself. So immediately after breakfast I examined my outside surroundings from my cell window. One look told me it would be useless to try to scale the wall, even should I decide to leave my cell by the window, for my purpose was to leave not only the cell, but the prison. Of course, I could have gone over the wall, but it would have taken me longer to lay my plans that way. Therefore, for the moment, I dismissed all idea of that.

"From this first observation I knew the river was on that side of the prison, and that there was also a playground there. Subsequently, these surmises were verified by a keeper. I knew then one important thing — that anyone might approach the prison wall from that side without attracting any particular attention. That was well to remember. I remembered it.

"But the outside thing which most attracted my attention was the feed wire to the arc light which ran within a few feet — probably three or four — of my cell window. I knew that would be valuable in the event I found it necessary to cut off that arc light."

"Oh, you shut it off tonight, then?" asked the warden.

"Having learned all I could from that window," resumed The Thinking Machine, without heeding the interruption, "I considered the idea of escaping through the prison proper. I recalled just how I had come into the cell, which I knew would be the only way. Seven doors lay between me and the outside. So, also for the time being, I gave up the idea of escaping that way. And I couldn't go through the solid granite walls of the cell."

The Thinking Machine paused for a moment and Dr. Ransome lighted a new cigar. For several minutes there was silence, then the scientific jailbreaker went on:

"While I was thinking about these things a rat ran across my foot. It suggested a new line of thought. There were at least half a dozen rats in the cell — I could see their beady eyes. Yet I had noticed none come under the cell door. I frightened them

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purposely and watched the cell door to see if they went out that way. They did not, but they were gone. Obviously they went another way. Another way meant another opening.

"I searched for this opening and found it. It was an old drain pipe, long unused and partly choked with dirt and dust. But this was the way the rats had come. They came from somewhere. Where? Drain pipes usually lead outside prison grounds. This one probably led to the river, or near it. The rats must therefore come from that direction. If they came a part of the way, I reasoned that they came all the way, because it was extremely unlikely that a solid iron or lead pipe would have any hole in it except at the exit.

"When the jailer came with my luncheon he told me two important things, although he didn't know it. One was that a new system of plumbing had been put in the prison seven years before; another that the river was only three hundred feet away. Then I knew positively that the pipe was a part of an old system; I knew, too, that it slanted generally toward the river. But did the pipe end in the water or on land?

"This was the next question to be decided. I decided it by catching several of the rats in the cell. My jailer was surprised to see me engaged in this work. I examined at least a dozen of them. They were perfectly dry; they had come through the pipe, and, most important of all, they were *not house rats, but field rats.* The other end of the pipe was on land, then, outside the prison walls. So far, so good.

"Then, I knew that if I worked freely from this point I must attract the warden's attention in another direction. You see, by telling the warden that I had come there to escape you made the test more severe, because I had to trick him by false scents."

The warden looked up with a sad expression in his eyes.

"The first thing was to make him think I was trying to communicate with you, Dr. Ransome. So I wrote a note on a piece of linen I tore from my shirt, addressed it to Dr. Ransome, tied a five-dollar bill around it and threw it out the window. I knew the guard would take it to the warden, but I rather hoped the warden would send it as addressed. Have you that first linen note, warden?"

The warden produced the cipher.

"What the deuce does it mean, anyhow?" he asked.

"Read it backward, beginning with the 'T' signature and disregard the division into words."

The warden did so.

"*T-h-i-s*, this," he spelled, studied it a moment, then read it off, grinning:

This is not the way I intend to escape.

"Well, now what do you think o' that?" he demanded, still grinning.

"I knew that would attract your attention, just as it did," said The Thinking Machine, "and if you really found out what it was it would be a sort of gentle rebuke."

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"What did you write it with?" asked Dr. Ransome, after he had examined the linen and passed it to Mr. Fielding.

"This," said the erstwhile prisoner, and he extended his foot. On it was the shoe he had worn in prison, though the polish was gone — scraped off clean. "The shoe blacking, moistened with water, was my ink; the metal tip of the shoe lace made a fairly good pen."

The warden looked up and suddenly burst into a laugh, half of relief, half of amusement.

"You're a wonder," he said, admiringly. "Go on."

"That precipitated a search of my cell by the warden, as I had intended," continued The Thinking Machine. "I was anxious to get the warden into the habit of searching my cell, so that finally, constantly finding nothing, he would get disgusted and quit. This at last happened."

The warden blushed.

"He then took my white shirt away and gave me a prison shirt. He was satisfied that those two pieces of the shirt were all that was missing. But while he was searching my cell I had another piece of that same shirt, about nine inches square, rolled into a small ball in my mouth."

"Nine inches of that shirt?" demanded the warden. "Where did it come from?"

"The bosoms of all stiff white shirts are of triple thickness," was the explanation. "I tore out the *inside* thickness, leaving the bosom only two thicknesses. I knew you wouldn't see it. So much for that."

There was a little pause, and the warden looked from one to another of the men with a sheepish grin.

"Having disposed of the warden for the time being by giving him something else to think about, I took my first serious step toward freedom," said Professor Van Dusen. "I knew, within reason, that the pipe led somewhere to the playground outside; I knew a great many boys played there; I knew that rats came into my cell from out there. Could I communicate with someone outside with these things at hand?

"First, I needed a long and fairly reliable thread, so — but here," he pulled up his trousers legs and showed that the tops of both stockings, of fine, strong lisle, were gone. "I unraveled those — after I got them started it wasn't difficult — and I had easily a quarter of a mile of thread that I could depend on.

"Then on half of my remaining linen I wrote, laboriously enough I assure you, a letter explaining my situation to this gentleman here," and he indicated Hutchinson Hatch. "I knew he would assist me — for the value of the newspaper story. I tied firmly to this linen letter a ten-dollar bill — there is no surer way of attracting the eye of anyone — and wrote on the linen: *Finder of this deliver to Hutchinson Hatch, Daily American, who will give another ten dollars for the information.*

"The next thing was to get this

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note outside on that playground where a boy might find it. There were two ways, but I chose the best. I took one of the rats — I became adept in catching them — tied the linen and money firmly to one leg, fastened my lisle thread to another, and turned him loose in the drain pipe. I reasoned that the natural fright of the rodent would make him run until he was outside the pipe and then out on earth he would probably stop to gnaw off the linen and money.

"From the moment the rat disappeared into that dusty pipe I became anxious. I was taking so many chances. The rat might gnaw the string, of which I held one end; other rats might gnaw it; the rat might run out of the pipe and leave the linen and money where they would never be found; a thousand other things might have happened. So began some nervous hours, but the fact that the rat ran on until only a few feet of the string remained in my cell made me think he was outside the pipe. I had carefully instructed Mr. Hatch what to do in case the note reached him. The question was: Would it reach him?

"I could only wait and make other plans in case this one failed. I openly attempted to bribe my jailer, and learned from him that he held the keys to only two of seven doors between me and freedom. Then I did something else to make the warden nervous. I took the steel supports out of the heels of my shoes and made a pretense of sawing the bars of my cell window. The warden raised a pretty row about that. He developed, too, the habit of shaking the bars of my cell window to see if they were solid. They were — then."

Again the warden grinned. He had ceased being astonished.

"With this one plan I had done all I could and could only wait to see what happened," the scientist went on. "I couldn't know whether my note had been delivered or even found, or whether the mouse had gnawed it up. And I didn't dare to draw back through the pipe that one slender thread which connected me with the outside.

"When I went to bed that night I didn't sleep, for fear there would come the slight signal twitch at the thread which was to tell me that Mr. Hatch had received the note. At half past three o'clock, I judge, I felt this twitch, and no prisoner actually under sentence of death ever welcomed a thing more heartily."

The Thinking Machine stopped and turned to the reporter.

"You'd better explain just what you did," he said.

"The linen note was brought to me by a small boy who had been playing baseball," said Mr. Hatch. "I immediately saw a big story in it, so I gave the boy another ten dollars, and got several spools of silk, some twine, and a roll of light, pliable wire. I had the finder of the note show me just where he had picked it up. I waited until night, then began the search with a small-bulb electric light. It was hours before I found the end of the

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drain pipe, half hidden in weeds. The pipe was very large there, about twelve inches across. Then I found the end of the lisle thread, twitched it, and I got an answering twitch.

"Then I fastened the silk to this and Professor Van Dusen began to pull it into his cell. I nearly had heart disease for fear the string would break. To the end of the silk I fastened the twine, and when that had been pulled in, I tied on the wire. Then that was drawn into the pipe and we had a substantial line, which rats couldn't gnaw, from the mouth of the drain into the cell."

The Thinking Machine raised his hand and Hatch stopped.

"All this was done in absolute silence," said the scientist. "But when the wire reached my hand I could have shouted. Then we tried another experiment. I tested the pipe as a speaking tube. Neither of us could hear very clearly, but I dared not speak loud for fear of attracting attention in the prison. At last I made him understand what I wanted immediately. He seemed to have great difficulty in understanding when I asked for nitric acid, and I repeated the word 'acid' several times.

"Then I heard a shriek from a cell above me. I knew instantly that someone had overheard, and when I heard you coming, Mr. Warden, I feigned sleep. If you had entered my cell at that moment that whole plan of escape would have ended there. But you passed on. That was the nearest I ever came to being caught.

"Having established this improvised trolley, it is easy to see how I got things in the cell and made them disappear at will. I merely dropped them back into the pipe. You, Mr. Warden, could not have reached the connecting wire with your fingers; they are too large. My fingers, you see, are longer and more slender. In addition, I guarded the top of that pipe with a rat — you remember how."

"I remember," said the warden, with a grimace.

"I thought that if anyone were tempted to investigate that hole the rat would dampen his ardor. Mr. Hatch could not send me anything useful through the pipe until next night, although he did send me change for ten dollars as a test. So I proceeded with the other parts of my plan. Then I evolved the method of escape which I finally employed.

"In order to carry this out successfully it was necessary for the guard in the yard to get accustomed to seeing me at the cell window. I arranged this by dropping linen notes to him, boastful in tone, to make the warden believe, if possible, one of his assistants was communicating with the outside for me. I would stand at my window for hours, gazing out, so the guard could see, and occasionally I spoke to him. In that way I learned that the prison had no electricians of its own, but was dependent upon the lighting company if anything should go wrong.

"That cleared the way to freedom

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perfectly. Early in the evening of the last day of my imprisonment, when it was dark, I planned to cut the feed wire which was only a few feet from my window, reaching it with an acid-tipped wire I had. That would make that side of the prison perfectly dark while the electricians were searching for the break. That would also bring Mr. Hatch into the prison yard.

"There was only one more thing to do before I actually began the work of setting myself free. This was to arrange final details with Mr. Hatch through our speaking tube. I did this within half an hour after the warden left my cell on the fourth night of my imprisonment. Mr. Hatch again had serious difficulty in understanding me, and I repeated the word 'acid' to him several times, and later on the words: 'No. 8 hat' — that's my size — and these were the things which made a prisoner upstairs confess to murder, so one of the jailers told me next day. This prisoner heard our voices, confused of course, through the pipe, which also went to his cell. The cell directly over me was not occupied, hence no one else heard.

"Of course the actual work of cutting the steel bars out of the window and door was comparatively easy with nitric acid, which I got through the pipe in tin bottles, but it took time. Hour after hour on the fifth and sixth and seventh days the guard below was looking at me as I worked on the bars of the window with the acid on a piece of wire. I used the tooth powder to prevent the acid spreading. I looked away abstractedly as I worked and each minute the acid cut deeper into the metal. I noticed that the jailers always tried the door by shaking the upper part, never the lower bars — therefore, I cut the lower bars, leaving them hanging in place by thin strips of metal. But that was a bit of dare-deviltry. I could not have gone that way so easily."

The Thinking Machine sat silent for several minutes.

"I think that makes everything clear," he went on. "Whatever points I have not explained were merely to confuse the warden and jailers. These things in my bed I brought in to please Mr. Hatch, who wanted to improve the story. Of course, the wig was necessary in my plan. The special delivery letter I wrote and directed in my cell with Mr. Hatch's fountain pen, then sent it out to him and he mailed it. That's all, I think."

"But your actually leaving the prison grounds and then coming in through the outer gate to my office?" asked the warden.

"Perfectly simple," said the scientist. "I cut the electric light wire with acid, as I said, when the current was off. Therefore when the current was turned on the arc didn't light. I knew it would take some time to find out what was the matter and make repairs. When the guard went to report to you, the yard was dark. I crept out the window — it was a tight fit, too — replaced the bars by standing on a narrow ledge and remained in a shadow until the force of electricians

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arrived. Mr. Hatch was one of them.

"When I saw him I spoke and he handed me a cap, a jumper, and overalls, which I put on within ten feet of you, Mr. Warden, while you were in the yard. Later Mr. Hatch called me, presumably as a workman, and together we went out the gate to get something out of the wagon. The gate guard let us pass out readily as two workmen who had just passed in. We changed our clothing and reappeared, asking to see you. That's all."

There was silence for several minutes. Dr. Ransome was first to speak.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Perfectly amazing."

"How did Mr. Hatch happen to come with the electricians?" asked Mr. Fielding.

"His father is manager of the company," replied The Thinking Machine.

"But what if there had been no Mr. Hatch outside to help?"

"Every prisoner has one friend outside who would help him escape."

"Suppose — just suppose — there had been no old plumbing system there?" asked the warden, curiously.

"There were two other ways out," said The Thinking Machine, enigmatically.

Ten minutes later the telephone bell rang. It was a request for the warden.

"Light all right, eh?" the warden asked. "Good. Wire cut beside Cell 13? Yes, I know. One electrician too many? What's that? Two came out?"

The warden turned to the others with a puzzled expression.

"He only let in four electricians, he has let out two, and says there are three left."

"I was the odd one," said The Thinking Machine.

"Oh," said the warden. "I see." Then through the phone: "Let the fifth man go. He's all right."

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One day last year we received the following letter from Robert B. Pitkin, Associate Editor of "The American Legion Magazine":

"As a devoted reader of EQMM I have often intended to call your attention to C. P. Donnel's 'Recipe for Murder,' which appeared in the January 1947 issue of our magazine. This story is my favorite of all the fiction we have ever used, and I have long felt that millions of non-Legionnaire detective-story fans were cheated when we, of all magazines, published Mr. Donnel's tale — for our magazine goes to Legionnaires only and though there are three million of them, that is not a big enough audience, in my opinion, for 'Recipe for Murder.'

"Even though I always intended to send you a copy of the story, it wasn't until I read your editorial comment on Hector Bolitho's 'Dirge,' listing the many tried and true means for manufacturing murder, that I took the bull by the horns. I believe that Mr. Donnel has not only written an intriguing story but has come up with a murder method which defies all known classification — a method so attractive that . . ."

But we had better stop right there, or we shall spoil Mr. Donnel's story! Suffice to say, we read the text sent on to us by Mr. Pitkin — for whose kindness and thoughtfulness we are enormously grateful — and we shared his high opinion of Mr. Donnel's tale. It is a flavorful story, savory in its appeal, delicious in its telling, and — well, we think your mouth will water too!

RECIPE FOR MURDER

by C. P. DONNEL, Jr.

JUST as the villa, clamorous with flowers, was not what he had expected, so was its owner a new quantity in his calculations. Madame Chalon, at forty, fitted no category of murderess; she was neither Cleopatra nor beldame. A Minerva of a woman, he told himself instantly, whose large, liquid eyes were but a shade lighter than the cobalt blue of the Mediterranean twinkling outside the tall windows of the salon where they sat.

Not quite a Minerva, he decided upon closer inspection. Her cheeks had the peach bloom of eighteen, and she was of a roundness, a smoothness, a desirability that rendered her, if less regal, infinitely more interesting. An ungraceful woman of her weight might be considered as journeying toward stoutness, but with Madame Chalon, he knew by instinct, the body was static with regard to weight and outline, and she would be at sixty

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what she was this day, neither more nor less.

"Dubonnet, Inspector Miron?" As he spoke, she prepared to pour. His reflex of hesitation lit a dim glow of amusement in her eyes, which her manners prevented from straying to her lips.

"Thank you." Annoyed with himself, he spoke forcefully.

Madame Chalon made a small, barely perceptible point of drinking first, as though to say, *See, M. Miron, you are quite safe.* It was neat. Too neat?

With a tiny smile now: "You have called about my poisoning of my husbands," she stated flatly.

"Madame!" Again he hesitated, nonplussed. "Madame, I . . ."

"You must already have visited the Prefecture. All Villefranche believes it," she said placidly.

He adjusted his composure to an official calm. "Madame, I come to ask your permission to disinter the body of M. Charles Wesser, deceased January 1939, and M. Ettienne Chalon, deceased May 1946, for official analysis of certain organs. You have already refused Sergeant Luchaire of the local station this permission. Why?"

"Luchaire is a type without politeness. I found him repulsive. He is, unlike you, without finesse. I refused the attitude of the man, not the law." She raised the small glass to her full lips. "I shall not refuse you, Inspector Miron." Her eyes were almost admiring.

"You are most flattering."

"Because," she continued gently, "I am quite sure, knowing the methods of you Paris police, that the disinterment has already been conducted secretly." She waited for his color to deepen, affecting not to notice the change. "And the analyses," she went on, as though there had been no break, "completed. You are puzzled. You found nothing. So now you, new to the case, wish to estimate me, my character, my capacity for self-control — and incidentally your own chances for maneuvering me into talk that will guide you in the direction of my guilt."

So accurately did these darts strike home that it would be the ultimate stupidity to deny the wounds. Better a disarming frankness, Miron decided quickly. "Quite true, Madame Chalon. True to the letter. But" — he regarded her closely — "when one loses two husbands of some age — but not old — to a fairly violent gastric disturbance, each within two years of marriage, each of a substantial fortune and leaving all to the widow . . . You see . . . ?"

"Of course." Madame Chalon went to the window, let her soft profile, the grand line of her bosom be silhouetted against the blue water. "Would you care for a full confession, Inspector Miron?" She was very much woman, provocative woman, and her tone, just short of caressing, warned Miron to keep a grip on himself.

"If you would care to make one, Madame Chalon," he said, as casually

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as he could. A dangerous woman.

"Then I shall oblige." Madame Chalon was not smiling. Through the open window a vagrant whiff of air brought him the scent of her. Or was it the scent of the garden. Caution kept his hand from his notebook. Impossible that she would really talk so easily. And yet . . .

"You know something of the art of food, M. Miron?"

"I am from Paris, you remember."

"And love, too?"

"As I said, I am from Paris."

"Then" — the bosom swelled with her long breath — "I can tell you that I, Hortense Eugene Villerois Wesser Chalon, did slowly and deliberately, with full purpose, kill and murder my first husband, M. Wesser, aged 57, and likewise my second, M. Chalon, aged 65."

"For some reason, no doubt." Was this a dream? Or insanity?

"M. Wesser I married through persuasion of family. I was no longer a girl. M. Wesser, I learned within a fortnight, was a pig — a pig of insatiable appetites. A crude man, Inspector; a belcher, a braggart, cheater of the poor, deceiver of the innocent. A gobbler of food, an untidy man of unappetizing habits — in short, with all the revolting faults of advancing age and none of its tenderness or dignity. Also, because of these things, his stomach was no longer strong."

Having gone thoroughly into the matter of M. Wesser in Paris and obtained much the same picture, he nodded. "And M. Chalon?"

"Older — as I was older when I wed him."

With mild irony, "And also with a weak stomach?"

"No doubt. Say, rather, a weak will. Perhaps less brutish than Wesser. Perhaps, *au fond*, worse, for he knew too many among the Germans here. Why did they take pains to see that we had the very best, the most unobtainable of foods and wines, when, daily, children fainted in the street? Murderess I may be, Inspector, but also a Frenchwoman. So I decided without remorse that Chalon should die, as Wesser died."

Very quietly, not to disturb the thread. "How, Madame Chalon?"

She turned, her face illumined by a smile. "You are familiar, perhaps with such dishes as *Dindonneau Forci aux Marrons?* Or *Supremes de Volaille à l'Indienne?* Or *Tournedos Mascotte?* Or *Omelette en Surprise à la Napolitaine?* Or *Potage Bagration Gras, Aubergines a la Turcque, Chaud-Froid de Cailles en Belle Vue*, or . . .?"

"Stop, Madame Chalon! I am simultaneously ravenous and smothering in food. Such richness of food!"

"You asked my methods, Inspector Miron. I used these dishes, and a hundred others. And in each of them, I concealed a bit of . . ." Her voice broke suddenly.

Inspector Miron, by a mighty effort, steadied his hand as he finished his Dubonnet. "You concealed a bit of what, Madame Chalon?"

"You have investigated me. You know who was my father."

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"Jean-Marie Villerois, chef superb, matchless disciple of the matchless Escoffier. Once called Escoffier's sole worthy successor."

"Yes. And before I was twenty-two, my father — just before his death — admitted that outside of a certain negligible weakness in the matter of braising, he would not be ashamed to own me as his equal."

"Most interesting. I bow to you." Miron's nerves tightened at this handsome woman's faculty for irrelevancy. "But you said you concealed in each of these dishes a bit of . . .?"

Madame Chalon turned her back to him. Fine shoulders, he noted; a waist not to be ignored; hips that delighted. She addressed the sea: "A bit of my art, and no more. That and no more, Inspector. The art of Escoffier, or Villerois. What man like Wesser or Chalon could resist? Three, four times a day I fed them rich food of the richest; varied, irresistible. I forced them to gorge to bursting, sleep, gorge again; and drink too much wine that they might gorge still more. How could they, at their ages, live — even as long as they did?"

A silence like the ticking of a far-off clock. "And love, Madame Chalon? Forgive me, but it was you who mentioned it."

"Rich food breeds love — or the semblance of it. What they called love, Inspector. They had me. Nor did I discourage them having also some little friends. And so they died — M. Wesser, aged 57, M. Chalon, aged 65. That is all."

Another silence, one that hummed. Inspector Miron stood up, so abruptly that she started, whirled. She was paler.

"You will come with me to Nice this evening, Madame Chalon."

"To the police station, Inspector Miron?"

"To the Casino, Madame Chalon. For champagne and music. We shall talk some more."

"But Inspector Miron . . . !"

"Listen to me, Madame. I am a bachelor. Of forty-four. Not too bad to look at, I have been told. I have a sum put away. I am not a great catch, but still, not one to be despised." He looked into her eyes. "I wish to die."

He straightened his shoulders, set his figure at its best as Madame Chalon's eloquent eyes roamed over him in the frankest of frank appraisals.

"The diets," said Madame Chalon finally and thoughtfully, "if used in moderation, are not necessarily fatal. Would you care to kiss my hand, Inspector Miron?"

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In this issue we begin an interesting series of puzzle stories which derive from ancient folklore — from the folk-tales of all ages and all nations. These modern versions have been written by a Philadelphia schoolteacher who calls himself Mark Rondy. We will tell you more about Mr. Rondy as the series progresses . . .

In "The Rock of Justice" (a Chinese puzzle, indeed!) you will meet one of the earliest judge-detectives in history — Lu Chi-Shen, whose euphonic name means Profound Wisdom. The omniscient judge, famous throughout his native land for his ability to decide seemingly impossible cases, is a familiar figure in all folk literature. He is, of course, Solomonic in origin, and usually displays his sagacity — as Solomon once did — by cleverly determining which of two litigants is innocent and which is guilty. Less often, he enacts a role comparable to that of a modern detective: he investigates a crime, unearths the evidence, makes the startling deductions which 'tec tradition now associates with Zadig, Dupin, Holmes, et al., and finally brings the criminal to book.

"The Rock of Justice" is that rarer type of folk-puzzle — a pure detective story which dates back to the second century. It was first related in a collection of tales written by Ying Shao, who lived in the time of the "Three Kingdoms." At least, so said Tu Chungyung when he re-told the story four hundred years later during the Liang Dynasty, and we are perfectly willing to take his word for it.

Whatever its true source in the yellowed pages of antiquity, this ancient Chinese puzzle proves once again that we moderns have no monopoly on ingenuity. And though conceived nearly two thousand years ago, this Chinese puzzle is as fresh and stimulating and easy to read as this morning's newspaper.

CHINESE PUZZLE: *The Rock of Justice*

re-told by MARK RONDY

Lu Chi-Shen leaned on his table, toying with the water-jar and the official whip as he listened to the blubbering youngster before him. It was festival day in the town. From a distance came the thump-whang-tootle of a parade. In the quiet courtroom Captain Ting kept wistfully stretching his neck doorward. The two guards stood in resigned patience, one at the door, the other at the window.

The boy finished his tale and stood waiting in front of the table. Greasy hands twisted an old black cap, tears channeled glistening lanes down

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smudged cheeks, miserable sniffles punctuated his breathing.

As was customary, Yu-lin, the clerk, read aloud the statement he had just taken down. Not the way the boy had worded it, of course, but in a much clearer and more grammatical form.

"My name is Ah Chuan. I am ten years old. My mother fries a bagful of wheat-cakes every day, and I sell them for a penny a cake. I keep the pennies in the cake-bag. Today I wanted to watch the parade, but I was afraid to carry my pennies, for fear of thieves. So I hid the bag under a big rock. When I returned from the parade, the bag was gone." The statement ended with the customary formula. "I ask for justice and the return of my money."

Lu Chi-Shen addressed Captain Ting. "Your opinion?"

Captain Ting scratched his chin and cleared his throat. "We could look around the rock, Excellency," he suggested. "For tracks."

Lu Chi-Shen snorted. "Tracks? In a town on festival day, with hundreds of people going and coming ever since dawn?"

"Well, Excellency, perhaps my men and I can — er — circulate among the crowds and watch for suspicious characters."

"If you want to get out to that parade," said Lu Chi-Shen crossly, "why don't you say so?"

Captain Ting kept a respectful silence.

"Justice." Lu Chi-Shen sighed, deeply. "Justice and the return of the money."

"Yes, Excellency," said Captain Ting. "But it isn't possible in this case. Out of thousands of people in the town today how are we going to pick out the one man who took the bag?"

Lu Chi-Shen was listening to him intently, and Captain Ting felt encouraged to continue.

"And as for locating the coins, how can you tell one penny from another?" He glanced at the boy beside him, and wrinkled his nose distastefully. "Besides, it serves this sticky ragamuffin right for being so stupid. He'll know better next time. His mother can always fry another batch of wheat-cakes. My suggestion, Excellency, is to dismiss the case."

"Justice," said Lu Chi-Shen softly, "is not a favor to be granted only to those wise enough or clean-smelling enough to deserve it. When justice is demanded, the request is enough . . . Captain Ting, you shall have your outing. We will tell one penny from another, and we will pick the thief out of a thousand men.

"Follow me." Lu Chi-Shen walked outside.

Captain Ting took Ah Chuan's arm and signaled his guards to fall in behind him. Lu Chi-Shen went swiftly to the outskirts of the crowd watching the parade. Heads turned at the sight of him and the ragged child and the guards.

"Boy," Lu Chi-Shen commanded loudly, "show me the rock!"

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Several in the crowd detached themselves to follow Lu Chi-Shen and his escort. Soon a considerable procession streamed curiously after them.

When Ah Chuan stopped and pointed to a large flat boulder, Lu Chi-Shen said, "Captain Ting, arrest that stone!" Then he strode off through the gaping crowd in the direction of the courthouse.

Captain Ting, his jaws falling, blinked after him. "Arrest — ?"

The stolid guards said nothing, but an excited buzz swelled from the onlookers.

Captain Ting regained his voice. "You heard what His Excellency said! Arrest that rock and take it to him!"

The guards shrugged. Then they bent down over the rock, took grips, and heaved.

The rock moved off, Captain Ting following stiffly, trying not to notice the amused faces and sly remarks all around him. Ah Chuan stumbled along, still held by Captain Ting's hand.

The courtroom was jammed when the stone arrived and was deposited before Lu Chi-Shen's table. Amid a curious hush Lu Chi-Shen glanced around to see that a guard was at the door, and one at the window, as custom required.

Yu-lin, somewhat pale and troubled, read out the boy's statement again. Dazedly, Ah Chuan testified that this was indeed the rock under which he had hidden his bag of coins.

"I find this rock guilty," declared Lu Chi-Shen, rising, "of not protecting properly the wealth entrusted to it. I hereby sentence this rock to forty lashes of the whip."

He gestured imperiously to Captain Ting, who took one look at Lu Chi-Shen's grave, determined face, then seized the whip off the desk.

Lu Chi-Shen nodded grimly. "Begin!"

Captain Ting lifted the whip and slashed it downward. Then he did it again. And again. At the fifth stroke, the watching people could contain themselves no longer. That sweating officer fiercely whipping that cold, unresponding rock! They burst into a tremendous gale of laughter.

Lu Chi-Shen's voice boomed out above the tumult. "Silence! Every man and woman in this courtroom is guilty of contempt!"

The hush this time was deathly. The people stared unbelievingly at one another, at the drawn swords of the guards, at the calm, unmoving countenance of Lu Chi-Shen.

"I hereby fine each of you one penny," Lu Chi-Shen continued. "Clerk Yu-lin, take the jar on my table and put it in the doorway. Guards, line them up. Only those who drop a penny in the jar may leave."

Fearfully, half-sure Lu Chi-Shen had gone out of his mind, the crowd lined up, readying pennies in their hands, hardly daring to breathe. Lu Chi-Shen posted himself at the door, watching each coin drop into the

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jar, and steadily eyeing each person who dropped it. Each time, at Lu Chi-Shen's nod, the guard lifted his sword to let a man or a woman run through the door in a relieved scamper.

At last, Lu Chi-Shen stopped one man who had just deposited his penny.

"This," said Lu Chi-Shen, "is the thief. Take him home, search his house, and when you find the bag of coins, return it to the boy."

"Y-y-yes, Excellency," stammered Captain Ting. "But — but how — ?"

"How do I know?" Lu Chi-Shen smiled. "You yourself, Captain Ting, suggested to me how I should trap him!"

EDITORS' NOTE: *How did Lu Chi-Shen trap the thief? You now have all the facts necessary to solve this ancient Chinese puzzle. If it persists in baffling you (as it did us), you will find the answer below. Happy puzzling!*

Captain Ting looked so confused that Lu Chi-Shen laughed outright.

"You said, Captain Ting, that it was impossible to tell one penny from another. But obviously that was not true. Ah Chuan's pennies *could* be identified. They had been lying for some time in a bag with freshly-baked cakes. Therefore, they would be oily and greasy, like the boy's own hands and clothes. Your yearning to go out to the parade, Captain Ting, gave me an idea for arousing the thief's curiosity to such a pitch that he would come to the courtroom along with the crowd. Then I arranged for everyone to put a penny into my water-jar. The moment I saw oil rising to the surface of the water, I knew the person who had dropped in that penny was the one. You see, Captain Ting," Lu Chi-Shen finished, "justice must never be denied — or declared impossible!"

NEXT MONTH . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE will bring you an unusual novelette:

Ten Thousand Blunt Instruments by PHILIP WYLIE

together with eight other memorable stories, including:

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Invited Witness by GEORGE HARMON COXE
It Was a Long Time Ago by A. A. MILNE
The Knitted Silk Scarf by ROY VICKERS

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Would you believe that at any time in his career Cornell Woolrich found it necessary to publish a story anonymously? Yes, it is hard to believe; yet in 1936 a story ascribed to Anonymous (the most prolific author in the entire history of literature) was the lead story in one of the most popular pulp magazines of its day. Perhaps the most incredible facet of all is that the story was featured on the magazine's cover — illustrated in four colors, its title in large, heavy type, and the author's name, also in bold type, given as Anonymous.

We asked Mr. Woolrich why this particular story, at this particular time, was published anonymously. To the best of his recollection, it was because the editors were doubtful of the public's reaction to a tale which, fourteen years ago, handled murder and suspense more frankly and daringly than other stories of that period. Only fourteen years ago the suspense technique (so popular in recent years) was considered editorially a "hot potato," a dangerous experiment, a ratiocinative risk! Indeed, 'tec times have changed.

Curiously enough, it wasn't a matter of morals. When a man learns beyond doubt that he is going to be murdered, surely he has the right to fight back. No court of law has ever taken a life for a life when the circumstances clearly indicated self-defense. It is only when the threatened man goes beyond *the necessity of self-preservation that the wages of sin are exacted with scrupulous justice.*

So, bearing in mind that the true significance of the exception is that it tends to prove the rule — in larceny as well as in logic, in murder as well as in mathematics — try to figure out for yourself why the editors of 1936 were unwilling to publish "The Night I Died" under the author's own name. . .

THE NIGHT I DIED

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

THE point about me is: that I should stay on the right side of the fence all those years, and then when I did go over, go over heart and soul like I did — all in the space of one night. In one hour, you might say.

Most guys build up to a thing like that gradually. Not me; why, I had never so much as lifted a check, dropped a slug into a telephone-slot before that. I was the kind of a droop, who, if I was short-changed, I'd shut up about it, but if I got too much change back I'd stand there and call their attention to it.

And as for raising my hand against

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a fellow-mortal — you had the wrong party, not Ben Cook. Yet there must have been a wide streak of it in me all along, just waiting to come out. Maybe all the worse for being held down all those years without a valve, like steam in a boiler.

Here I'd been grubbing away for ten or twelve years in Kay City, at thirty per, trying on suits (on other guys) in the men's clothing section of a department store. Saying "sir" to every mug that came in and smoothing their lapels and patting them on the back. I go home one night that kind of a guy, honest, unambitious, wishy-washy, without even a parking-ticket on my conscience, and five minutes later I've got a murder on my hands.

I think it was probably Thelma more than anyone else who brought this latent streak in me to the surface; it might have stayed hidden if she hadn't been the kind of woman she was. You'll see, as you read on, that she had plenty of reason later to regret doing so. Like conjuring up the devil and then not being able to get rid of him.

Thelma was my common-law wife. My first wife, Florence, had given me up as hopeless five years before and gone to England. We parted friends. I remember her saying she liked me well enough, I had possibilities, but it would take too long to work them out; she wanted her husband ready-made. She notified me later she'd got a divorce and was marrying some big distillery guy over there.

I could have married Thelma after that, but somehow we never got around to it, just stayed common-law wife and husband, which is as good as anything. You know how opposites attract, and I guess that's how I happened to hook up with Thelma; she was just my opposite in every way. Ambitious, hard as nails, no compunctions about getting what she wanted. Her favorite saying was always, "If you can get away with it, it's worth doing!"

For instance, when I told her I needed a new suit and couldn't afford one, she'd say: "Well, you work in a men's clothing department! Swipe one out of the stock — they'll never know the difference." I used to think she was joking.

After she egged me on to tackle our manager for a raise, and I got turned down pretty, she said: "I can see where you'll still be hauling in thirty-a-week twenty years from now, when they have to wheel you to work in a chair! What about me? Where do I come in if a hit-and-run driver spreads you all over the street tomorrow? Why don't you take out some insurance at least?"

So I did. First I was going to take out just a five-thousand-dollar policy, which was pretty steep for me at that, but Thelma spoke up. "Why not make it worth our while? Don't worry about the premiums, Cookie. I've got a little something put away from before I knew you. I'll start you off. I'll pay the first premium for you myself — after that, we'll see." So I went

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for ten thousand worth, and made Thelma the beneficiary, of course, as I didn't have any folks or anyone else to look after.

That had been two years before; she had been paying the premiums for me like a lamb ever since. All this made me realize that under her hard surface she was really very big-hearted, and this one night that I started home a little earlier than usual I was warbling like a canary and full of pleasant thoughts about "my little woman," as I liked to call her, and wondering what we were going to have for dinner.

Six was my usual quitting-time at the store, but we had just got through taking inventory the night before, and I had been staying overtime without pay all week, so the manager let me off an hour sooner. I thought it would be nice to surprise Thelma, because I knew she didn't expect me for another two or three hours yet, thinking we would still be taking inventory like other nights. So I didn't phone ahead I was coming.

Sherrill, who had the necktie counter across the aisle, tried to wangle me into a glass of suds. If I'd given in, it would have used up my hour's leeway. I would have got home at my regular time — and it also would have been my last glass of suds on this earth. I didn't know that; the reason I refused was I decided to spend my change instead on a box of candy for her. Sweets to the sweet!

Our bungalow was the last one out on Copeland Drive. The asphalt stopped a block below. The woods began on the other side of us, just young trees like toothpicks. I had to get off at the drug store two blocks down anyway, because the buses turned around and started back there. So I bought a pound of caramels tied with a blue ribbon, and I headed up to the house.

I quit whistling when I turned up the walk, so she wouldn't know I was back yet and I could sneak up behind her maybe and put my hands over her eyes. I was just full of sunshine, I was! Then when I already had my key out, I changed my mind and tiptoed around the house to the back. She'd probably be in the kitchen anyway at this hour, so I'd walk in there and surprise her.

She was. I heard her talking in a low voice as I pulled the screen door noiselessly back. The wooden door behind that was open, and there was a passageway with the kitchen opening off to one side of it.

I heard a man's voice answer hers as I eased the screen closed behind me without letting it bang. That disappointed me for a minute because I knew she must have some delivery-man or collector in there with her, and I wasn't going to put my hands over her eyes in front of some grocery clerk or gas inspector and make a sap out of myself.

But I hated to give the harmless little plan up, so I decided to wait out there for a minute until he left, and motion him on his way out not to give me away. Then go ahead in and sur-

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prise her. A case of arrested development, I was!

She was saying, but very quietly, "No, I'm not going to give you the whole thing now. You've got seventy-five, you get the rest afterwards —"

I whistled silently and got worried. "Whew! She must have let our grocery bills ride for over a year, to amount to that much!" Then I decided she must be talking in cents, not dollars.

"If I give you the whole two hundred fifty before time, how do I know you won't haul your freight out of town — and not do it? What comeback would I have? We're not using I.O.U.'s in this, buddy, don't forget!"

She sounded a lot tougher than I'd ever heard her before, although she'd never exactly been a shrinking violet. But it was his next remark that nearly dropped me where I was. "All right, have it your way. Splash me out another cuppa java —" And a chair hitched forward. Why, that was no deliveryman; he was sitting down in there and she was feeding him!

"Better inhale it fast," she said crisply, "he'll be showing up in another half-hour."

My first thought, of course, was what anyone else's would have been — that it was a two-time act. But when I craned my neck cautiously around the door just far enough to get the back of his head in line with my eyes, I saw that was out, too. Whatever he was and whatever he was doing there in my house, he was no back-door John!

He had a three days' growth of beard on his jawline and his hair ended in little feathers all over his neck, and if you'd have whistled at his clothes they'd have probably walked off him of their own accord and headed your way.

He looked like a stumblebum or derelict she'd hauled in out of the woods.

The next words out of her mouth, lightning fizzled around me and seemed to split my brain three ways. "Better do it right here in the house. I can't get him to go out there in the woods — he's scared of his own shadow, and you might miss him in the dark. Keep your eye on this kitchen-shade from outside. It'll be up until eight thirty.

"When you see it go down to the bottom, that means I'm leaving the house for the movies. I'll fix this back door so you can get in when I leave, too. Now I've shown you where the phone is — right through that long hall out there. Wait'll you hear it ring before you do anything; that'll be me phoning him from the picture-house, pretending I've forgotten something, and that'll place him for you. You'll know just where to find him, won't run into him unexpectedly on your way in.

"His back'll be toward you and I'll be distracting his attention over the wire. Make sure he's not still ticking when you light out, so don't spare the trigger, no one'll hear it way out here at that hour!

"I'll hear the shot over the wire

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and I'll hang up, but I'm sitting the rest of the show out. I wanna lose a handkerchief or something at the end and turn the theater inside out, to place myself. That gives you two hours to fade too, so I don't start the screaming act till I get back at eleven and find him —"

He said, "Where does the other hundred-seventy-five come in? Y' don't expect me to show up here afterwards and colleck, do ya?"

I heard her laugh, kind of. "It's gonna be in the one place where you can't get at it without doing what you're supposed to! That way I'm going to be sure you don't welsh on me! It's going to be right in his own inside coat-pocket, without his knowing it! I'm going to slip it in when I kiss him goodbye, and I know him, he'll never find it. Just reach in when you're finished with him, and you'll find it there waiting for you!"

"Lady," he whispered. "I gotta hand it to you!"

"Get going," she commanded.

I think it was that last part of it that made me see red and go off my nut, that business about slipping the blood-money right into my own pocket while I was still alive, for him to collect after I was dead. Because what I did right then certainly wasn't in character. Ben Cook, the Ben Cook of up until that minute, would have turned and sneaked out of that house (unless his knees had given way first) and run for his life and never showed up near there again. But I wasn't Ben Cook any more — something seemed to blow up inside me. I heard the package of candy hit the floor next to me with a smack, and then I was lurching in on them, bellowing like a goaded bull. Just rumbling sounds, more than words. "You — murderess! Your — own — husband!" No, it certainly wasn't me; it was a man that neither of us had known existed until now. Evil rampant, a kind of living nemesis sprung from their own fetid plotting, like a jack-in-the-box.

There was a red-and-white checked tablecloth on the kitchen table. There was a cup and saucer on it, and a gun. I didn't see any of those things. The whole room for that matter was red, like an undeveloped photographic print.

The gun came clear, stood out, only after his arm had clamped down on it like an indicator pointing it out. My own did the same thing instinctively, but a second too late; my hand came down on his wrist instead of the gun. The crash of a pair of toppled chairs in the background was inconsequential, as was her belated shriek of baffled fury: "Give it to him now, you! Give it to him quick — or we're sunk!" Whatever else there was in that hell-howl, there wasn't fear. Any other woman would have fainted dead away; you don't know Thelma.

The cry, though, was like cause and effect; he didn't need to be told. The gun was already being lifted bodily between us, by the two pressures counteracting each other — mine pushing it away from me, his

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pushing it toward me. Neither of us trying to push it up, but up it went in an arc, first way over our heads, then down again to body-level once more. Outside of our flailing left arms, which had each fastened on the other's, I don't recall that our legs or the rest of our bodies moved much at all.

She could have turned the scales by attacking me herself with something, from behind. It was the one thing she didn't do — why I don't know. Subconsciously unwilling to the last, maybe, to raise a hand to me in person.

After about thirty seconds, not more — but it seemed like an age — it finally went off. Just past my own face, over my shoulder, and out somewhere into the passageway behind us. Then it started turning slowly between us, desperately slowly, by quarter-inches, and the second time it went off it had already traveled a quarter of the compass around. It hit the side-wall, that time, broadside to the two of us. It went on past that point, turning laboriously in its double grip, and the third time it went off right into his mouth.

He took it down with him, it was his hand that had been next to it, not mine, and I just stood there with both arms out — and empty.

I suppose I would have given it to her next if it had stayed in my own hand. She expected me to, she didn't ask for mercy. "All right, I'm next!" she breathed. "Get it over as quick as you can!" And threw up both forearms horizontally in front of her eyes.

I was too tired for a minute to reach down and get it. That was what saved her. I don't remember the next few minutes after that. I was sitting slumped in one of the chairs. I must have uprighted it again, and she was saying: "The ten grand is yours now, Cookie, if you'll use your head."

The way it sounded she must have been talking for several minutes, talking herself out of what was rightfully coming to her. What she'd been saying until then hadn't registered with me, though. That did.

"Get out," I said dully. "Don't hang around me. I may change my mind yet." But the time for that was over, and she probably knew it as well as I did. The room had come back to its regular colors by now. Only the tablecloth was red any more, that and a little trickle that had come out of his open mouth onto the linoleum.

She pointed at him. "That's you, down there. Don't you get it? Ready-made." She came a little closer, leaning across the table toward me on the heels of her hands. "Why pass a break like this up, Cookie? Made-to-order. Ten grand. Play ball with me, Cookie." Her voice was a purr, honey-low.

"Get ou —" I started to mutter, but my voice was lower now too. She was under my skin and working deeper down every minute. I was wide open to anything anyway, after what had happened.

She held up her hand quickly, tuning out my half-hearted protest. "All right, you caught me red-handed.

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You don't hear me denying it, do you? You don't see me trying to bellyache out of it, do you? It muffed, and the best man won. That's giving it to you straight from the shoulder. But the policy I slapped on you still holds good, the ten gees is yours for the taking —" She pointed down again. "And there's your corpse."

I turned my head and looked at him, kept staring thoughtfully without a word. She kept turning them out fast as her tongue could manage.

"It's up to you. You can go out to the phone and turn me in, send me up for ten years — and spend the rest of your life straightening the pants on guys at thirty per week. Have it that way if you want to. Or you can come into ten thousand dollars just by being a little smart. The guy is dead anyway, Cookie. You couldn't bring him back now even if you wanted to. What's the difference under what name he goes six-feet-under? He even gets a better break, at that; gets a buggy-ride and a lot of flowers instead of taking a dive head-first into Potter's Field!"

I hadn't taken my eyes off him, but I already wanted to hear more. "It's wacky, you're talking through your lid," I said hopefully. "How you gonna get away with it? What about all the people in this town that know me? What about the guy that sold me the insurance? What about the bunch down at the store where I work? I no more look like him than —"

"If it's his face got you stopped, we can take care of that easy. And outside of a phiz, what's so different between one guy and the next? Stretch out a minute, lie down next to him — I wanna see something."

I wasn't hypocritical enough to hesitate any more. She already knew I was with her anyway — she could tell. I got down flat on the floor alongside of him, shoulder to shoulder. He wasn't laid out straight by any means, but she attended to that with a few deft hitches. She stood back and measured us with her eyes. "You're about an inch taller, but the hell with that." I got up again.

She went over and pulled down the shade to the bottom, came back with cigarette-smoke boiling out of her nose. "It's a suicide, of course, otherwise the police'll stick their noses into it too heavy. A farewell note from you to me ought to hold them. Run up and bring down one of your other suits, and a complete set of everything — down to shorts and socks."

"But what're we going to do about his map?"

"A bucketful of boiling lye will take care of that. We got some down the basement, haven't we? Come on, help me get him down there."

"Where does it figure, though? You want 'em to believe he had guts enough to stick his face in that?"

"You went down there and bumped yourself though the front teeth with the gun, see? You keeled over backwards and dumped this bucket on top of your face in falling. A couple of hours under that and he'll be down to rock bottom above the shoulders, they

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won't have much to go by. His hair's pretty much the color of yours, and you haven't been to a dentist in years, so they can't check you in that way."

"It's still full of loopholes," I said.

"Sure it is," Thelma agreed, "but what reason'll they have to go looking for 'em, with me there screaming the eardrums off 'em that you were my husband? And waving your good-bye note in their faces! There won't be anyone missing from this town. He was a vagrant on his way through. This was the first house he hit for a hand-out when he came out of the woods. He told me so himself, and he never got past here. The police'll be the least of our worries, when it comes to it, and as for the insurance investigator, once I get past the first hurdle I know just what to do so there's no chance for it to backfire: send him to the crematorium in a couple days instead of planting him in the cemetery. Fat lot of good an order for an exhumation'll do them after that!"

I said about the same thing he'd said, this dead guy, only a little while ago. "You're good — damn your soul! I think we can pull it at that!"

"Think? I know we can!" She snapped her cigarette butt at the side of his face — and hit it! "Always remember — if you can get away with anything, it's worth doing. Now let's go — we haven't got much time."

I picked him up by the shoulders and she took him by the feet, and we carried him out of the kitchen and down the cellar stairs and laid him down temporarily on the floor down there, any old way. The gun had gone right with him the whole way, at the end of his dangling arm.

The laundry was down there, and the oil-burner, and lines for hanging up clothes, and so on. There was a gas-heater for boiling up wash. She lit that, then she filled a pail half-full of water and put it on to heat. Then she dumped lye into it for all she was worth until there wasn't any more left around. "As long as it takes the skin off his face," she remarked. "Go up and get the clothes now, like I told you, and doctor up a suicide-note. Better take something and get those slugs out of the kitchen-wall; it went off twice, didn't it, before it rang the bell? Rub ashes in the nicks, so they won't look new. Let me know when you're ready."

But I wasn't Ben Cook the slough any more. "And leave you alone down here with that gun? It's still got three in it. You're so full of bright ideas, how do I know you won't go back to your original parlay after all?"

She threw up her hands impatiently. "Forget it, will you! It's got to stay in his mitt like it is, you can't take it up with you. We're both in this together, aren't we? We either trust each other the whole way, or we may as well call it quits right now!"

She was blazing with an unholy sort of enthusiasm. I could tell by looking at her I had nothing to worry about as far as she was concerned any more. It was contagious, too, that was the worst part of it — greenback-fever. I turned around and beat it upstairs to

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the top floor. There were spots in front of my eyes, ten-spots.

I got him out a complete set of everything. For an artistic finishing-touch I even threw in a spare truss like I wore. That had figured in my examination for the insurance. I took a razor with me and a pair of clippers that I'd been in the habit of using to save myself the price of a haircut. I chased down to the desk in the living-room, got out paper, and wrote:

Thelma my darling:

I've thought it over and I guess you're right. I'll never amount to anything. I haven't had the courage to tell you yet, but Grierson turned me down last month when I asked him for a raise. I'm just a millstone around your neck, just dead-weight; you'll be better off without me. When you come home tonight and read this and go looking for me, you'll know what I'm driving at. Don't go near the basement, honey, that's where I'll be. Goodby and God bless you.

Ben

Which I thought was pretty good. She did too, when I went down and showed it to her. She flashed me a look. "I think I've been underestimating you all these years."

Clouds of steam were coming from the pail of lye. "Beat it up and attend to the bullet-holes, and the blood on the kitchen-floor," I said, "while I go to work on him —"

I could hear her footsteps pattering busily back and forth over my head while I was busy down there.

I gave him a quick once-over with the razor and a cake of yellow laundry soap, clipped his neck a little, so we wouldn't have to count too much on the lye.

I piled his own worm-eaten duds into a bundle and tied it up, then outfitted him from head to foot.

It took plenty of maneuvering to slip his arm through the sleeves of the shirt and jacket without dislodging the gun from his hand.

I tied his tie and shoelaces for him as if I were his valet, and filled his pockets with all the junk I had in my own, down to the crumpled pack of butts I was toting. I strapped my wristwatch on him, and then I straightened up and gave him the once-over. He looked a lot more like me now than he had before I'd begun.

She came trooping down again, with her hat on for the movies. "Slick," she breathed. "Everything's all set upstairs. Here's the two wild bullets. What're you doing with his stuff, putting it in the furnace?"

"Nothing doing," I said, "that's muffed too often. All they need's a button or a strand of hair left over in there and we go boom! I'm taking it with me when I go and I am getting rid of it some place else."

"That's the ticket!" she agreed. She handed me a pair of smoked glasses and an old golf cap. "Here, I dug these up for you, for when you light out. Anyone that knows you will know you anyway — but in case anyone passes you while you're on the lam, they'll do.

"Steer clear of downtown what-

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ever you do. Better powder about ten minutes after I do, take the back door, cut through the woods, stay away from the highway until you get over to Ferndale — somebody might spot you from a passing car. You can hop a bus there at midnight — to wherever you decide to hole in, and better make it the other side of the State-line. Now we gotta finish up fast. I phoned the drug store to send over some aspirin, told 'em you felt kinda low —"

"What's the idea?"

"Don't you get it? I'm leavin' just as the errand-boy gets here, he even sees you kiss me goodbye at the front door. Hold him up a minute hunting for change, so that he has me walking in front of him down the street toward the show. I don't want to get the chair for something I didn't do, Cookie! Now, what name are you going to use and where'll I reach you when the pay-off comes through?"

I laughed harshly. "You're pretty anxious to see that I get my cut."

"I'm glad you used that word," she said drily. "It's my favorite little word. Nuts! You can't come back here, you know that! I've gotta get it to you. What're you worrying about, we've got each other stopped, haven't we? If I try to hog the dough, all you do is show up, it goes back where it came from, and we both land in clink. On the other hand, you can't get it without little Thelma —"

"We split it seventy-five, twenty-five, and little Thelma's on the short end for being such a smart girl," I growled.

Something gave one corner of her mouth a little hike up. "Done," she said. "Now hurry up, give him his facial. Measure the distance off first."

We stood him upright on his feet, then let him down backwards in a straight line toward the heater on which the pail of lye was sizzling. The back of his head cleared it by two, three inches.

"Move him in a little closer," she said, "his conk's supposed to tip it over as he goes down."

"All right, stand back," I said, "and watch your feet."

I took it off the stove, turned it upside down, and doused it on him, arched as far away from the splash as I could get. It dropped down on his head like a mold; only a little spattered on his body below the shoulders. Just as the pail dropped over his head like a visor, the front doorbell rang.

The last thing she said as she went hustling up was, "Watch out where you step — don't leave any tracks!"

I caught up with her halfway down the front hall. "Whoa! Pass over that hundred-seventy-five you were going to stuff into my pocket. I can't live on air next few weeks!"

She took it grudgingly out of her handbag. "It comes off your share, don't forget," she let me know.

"All right, and here's one for your memory-book," I whispered. "I'm Ned Baker at the Marquette Hotel over in Middleburg. Don't put it on paper, but see that you hang onto it. It's easy enough — Cook, Baker, see?"

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The bell rang a second time.

"About three weeks, the minute I put the check through," she promised. "All set? Here goes! Loosen your tie — you're staying in and you're in a hari-kari mood. Play up!"

I stayed where I was. She went to the door squalling, "G'by, hon! Sure you won't change your mind and come with me?" She opened the door and an eighteen-year-old kid named Larry whom we both knew by sight said, "Package from the drug store, Mrs. Cook. Thirty-five cents."

Again she shook the house to the rafters. "Here's your aspirin, dear!"

I shuffled up acting like a sick calf. I separated one of the tens she'd just given me from the rest and offered it to him. He said he didn't have that much change. "Wait a minute, I think I've got it inside," I said. Meanwhile she was sticking her snoot up at me. "G'by, dear, you won't be lonely now, will you?"

He was facing my way, so I tried to look tragic. "Enjoy your show," I murmured bravely, pecking at her with my mouth. I walked down the steps with her and part of the way toward the sidewalk, with my arm around her waist. She turned back to wave a couple times, and I waved back at her. The kid was taking it all in from the doorway.

"They got a revival of Garbo tonight," he remarked when I came back. "Don't you like Garbo, Mr. Cook?"

I sighed. "I got too much on my mind tonight, Larry," I told him. I let her get to the first crossing, then I brought out the thirty-five cents and gave him a dime for himself. He thanked me and started off after her.

I locked the door (she had her own key) and then I bolted back to the cellar-stairs and took a last look down from the head of them. Threads of steam were still coming out from under the rim of the lye-pail, upturned there over his face.

I picked up his bundle of clothes, which I'd left at the top of the stairs, and wrapped them in good strong brown paper. The two bullets were in there with them, and the scrapings from his jaw and neck on scraps of paper. The brownish rag, too, with which she'd scoured the little blood off the linoleum.

The latter didn't have a mark left on it to the naked eye — and there was no reason for them to give it a benzidine test. The bullet-holes were okay too, she'd spread them out a little with a knife to look like knot-holes in the wood and dirtied them with ashes. She'd even washed and put away the used coffee-cup, and the note was in place on the desk.

I left my own hat up on the rack, and put on the cap, pulled it well down over my eyes.

I left the lights just the way they were in all the rooms, then I went up to the rear room on the second floor, which was dark, and stood watching for a long time. There weren't any houses in back of us, just a big open field with the woods off to the right.

In the daytime, crossing the field to

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get to them, I might have been spotted from one of the houses farther down, but not at this hour. It was a clear night, but there wasn't any moon.

I went downstairs, opened the screen-door, pulled the wooden one closed behind me, let the screen one flap back in place, and jumped away in a hurry from the square of light that still came through the oblong pane in the wooden one. We would have locked that on the inside if we had both left the house together, but staying home alone the way I was supposed to tonight, it could very well stay unlocked without arousing suspicion.

I cut diagonally away from the house, to get out of sight of the roadway that fronted it and bisected the woods all the way to Ferndale. It took a turn, however, halfway between the two points, so going through the woods was really a short-cut.

Within five minutes after I had left the kitchen-door, and less than a quarter of an hour since Thelma had left the house all told, the first skinny saplings closed around me and hid me from sight.

By a quarter to twelve the trees were starting to thin out again, this time in front of me, and the lights of Ferndale were glimmering through them. I was half-shot and my feet were burning, but it was worth it; I hadn't seen a living soul — and what was more important, not a living soul had seen me. I'd kept from getting lost and going around in a circle, which could have happened to me quite easily in those woods, by always managing to keep the highway to Ferndale parallel with me on my right. Even when I was out of sight of it, an occasional car whizzing by gave it away to me. Otherwise I might very well have done a Babe-in-the-Woods act and come out again where I started from. I'd opened the parcel and retied it again on my way. Took out the two slugs and the bloody rag and buried them in three separate places.

The clothes themselves were too bulky to bury with my bare fingernails, and I wasn't just going to leave them under a stone or anything. Nor could I risk putting a match to them and burning them — the light might have given me away to someone. The safest thing was to keep them with me and get rid of them long afterwards at my leisure.

Ferndale wasn't much more than a crossroads, but the interstate buses stopped there. I stopped for a minute and brushed myself off as well as I could before I showed out in the open. I looked respectable enough, but that was almost a drawback in itself.

A well-dressed guy dropping down out of nowhere at midnight to board a bus, without a through ticket, wasn't really the most unnoticeable thing in the world. But I had no choice in the matter. Nor very much time to make up my mind. The last one through was sometime between twelve and one. I decided, however, not to buy a Middleburg ticket from here but ride

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right through past it to the end of the line, and then double back to Middleburg from that end in a couple of days. That would make the trail a little harder to pick up — just in case.

As for the sun-glasses, which I'd been carrying in my pocket, I decided against them altogether. That was the one detail, it seemed to me, about which Thelma hadn't shown very good judgment. No one in Ferndale knew me in the first place, and they'd only attract attention instead of lessening it. People don't wear those things in the middle of the night, no matter how weak their eyes are supposed to be.

I straightened my shoulders and strolled casually out of the trees into the open, past an outlying cottage or two, dead to the world at this hour, and onto the single stretch of paved sidewalk that Ferndale boasted. A quick-lunch place was open and blazing with light, and the bus depot was down at the far end. There was a small but up-to-date little waiting-room there, washrooms, a magazine-stand, etc. No one around but the colored porter and an elderly man who looked like he was waiting to meet somebody getting off the incoming bus.

I went up to the ticket-window as casually as I could and rapped on the counter a couple of times. Finally the porter called out, "Johnson! Somebody at the wicket!" and the ticket-seller came out of the back some place.

I said, "Gimme a through ticket to Jefferson." That was the neighboring state capital, terminus of this line.

He said, "I don't know if I can get you a seat at this hour, usually pretty full up. You shoulda put in a reservation ahead — There's a six-o'clock bus, though."

"Lissen," I said, looking him in the eye, "I gotta get home. Whaddya think I'm going to do, sit around here all night waiting for the morning bus?"

He called over my shoulder to the elderly gent, who was reading a paper, "You meeting somebody on the next bus, mister?"

The old fellow said, "Yep, my nevvew's coming down on it —"

"That's that, then," he said to me indifferently. "'Leven-eighty."

"When's it get in?" I asked, pocketing my change.

"Ten minutes," he said, and went back inside again.

I was down at the quick-lunch filling up on hot dogs when the bus slithered in. I picked up my package and went up toward it. A young fellow of high-school age was getting off and being greeted by the elderly gent. I showed my ticket and got on.

Its lights were off and most of the passengers were sprawled out asleep. The ticket-seller had been right: there was only a single vacant seat in the whole conveyance, the one that the kid had just got out of! It was a bum one on the aisle, too.

My seat-mate, by the window, had his hat down over his nose and was breathing through his mouth. I didn't pay any attention to him, reached up

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and shoved my bundle onto the rack overhead, sat back and relaxed. The driver got on again, the door closed, and we started off with a lurch.

My lightweight bundle hadn't been shoved in far enough in the dark: the motion of the bus promptly dislodged it and it toppled down across the thighs of the man next me. He came to with a nervous start and grunted from under his hat-brim.

"Excuse me," I said, "didn't mean to wake you —"

He shoved his hat back and looked at me. "Why, hullo, Cook!" he said. "Where you going at this hour of the night?" And held his hand spaded at me.

A couple of years went by, with my face pointed straight ahead and ice-water circulating in my veins. There wasn't very much choice of what to do about it. Even if the bus had still been standing still with its door open, which it wasn't any more, it wouldn't have done any good to jump off it. He'd already seen me.

And to try to pass the buck and tell him to his face he had the wrong party, well what chance had I of getting away with that, with our shoulders touching, even though it was dark inside the bus? I couldn't stop it from getting light in a few hours, and there wasn't any other seat on the bus. All I'd succeed in doing would be snubbing him, offending him, and making him start thinking there must be something phony afoot; in other words, indelibly impressing the incident upon his memory.

Whereas if I took it in my stride, lightly, maybe I could keep it from sinking in too deeply; maybe I could do something about the timing to blur it a little, make him think later on that it was the night before and not tonight that he'd ridden with me on a bus. It had to be the night before, it couldn't be the same night that I was supposed to be bumping myself off down in the cellar back at Copeland Drive!

"Well, for the luvva Pete, Sherrill!" I said with shaky cordiality. "Where you going yourself at this hour of the night?" I shook his mitt, but there was less pressure now on his side than mine.

"Y'acted like y'didn't know me for a minute," he complained, but rapidly thawed out again. "What'd you get on way the hell out at Ferndale for?" he said.

But that one had to be squelched at all costs, no matter how unconvincing it sounded. After all, he'd definitely been asleep when they pulled into Ferndale, he couldn't have seen who got on there.

"I didn't. What's the matter with *you*?" I said in surprise. "I changed seats, come back here from up front, that's all." There was a little girl holding one of the front seats in her own right, but she was asleep with her head on her mother's lap, it looked like the seat was vacant from where we were. "He'll forget about it by the time she straightens up in the morning — let's hope," I thought.

He seemed to forget it then and

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there. "Funny I missed seeing you when I got on," was all he said. "I was the last one in, they even held it for me a minute —" He offered me a cigarette, took one himself, seemed to have no more use for sleep. "Where you heading for, anyway?" he asked.

"Jefferson," I said.

"That's funny," he said, "I am too!"

If he could have heard the things I was saying inside myself about him at the moment, he would have let out a yell and probably dived through the window, glass and all. "How come?" I said, between unheard swear-words.

I knew it would be my turn right after his, and I was so busy shaping up my own explanation, I only half-heard his. Something about the manager phoning him at the last minute after he'd already gone home that afternoon, to pinch-hit for our store's buyer, who'd been laid up with the flu, and look after some consignments of neckties that were waiting down there and badly needed in stock "What's taking you down there?" he asked, as I knew he would.

I told him I had to see a specialist, that I'd been below par for some time and none of the docs back home had seemed able to do a thing for me.

"When you going back?" he wanted to know.

"'Morrow afternoon," I said. "Be home in time for supper —" I had to be "back" by then, I couldn't hope to fog him on the time element by more than twenty-four hours; that I'd even be able to do that much was highly doubtful, but I might just get away with it.

"That's just about when I'll be going back, too," he said chummily. "Be back at work Friday morning."

I answered with careful emphasis: "Whaddya mean, Friday? The day after tomorrow'll be Thursday. Tonight's Tuesday."

"No," he said innocently, "you've got your dates mixed. Tonight's Wednesday."

This went on for about five minutes between us, without heat of course. I finally pulled my horns in when he offered: "Wait, I'll ask the driver, he ought to be able to straighten us out —"

"Never mind, guess you're right," I capitulated. I wasn't keen on attracting the driver's attention to myself in any shape, form, or manner. But I'd done what I wanted to: I'd succeeded in conditioning Sherill's mind. Later he wouldn't be sure whether it *was* Wednesday or not, when he thought back to tonight.

Right on top of that came a honey. "Whaddya say we split expenses while we're there?" he offered. "Share the same hotel room."

"What do I need a hotel room for?" I said shortly. "I told you I'm starting back on the afternoon bus!"

"Hell," he said, "if you're as rundown as you say you are, funny, you should be willing to go without sleep a whole night! We don't get into Jefferson till seven. You got a before-breakfast appointment with your doctor?"

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The skepticism in his voice had to be nipped before it got steam up, I could see; the only way seemed to be by falling in with his suggestion. I could let him start back alone, pretend my appointment had been postponed until afternoon and I had to take a later bus. Technically, even one of those could get me home in time for my own suicide.

We had our breakfasts together at the bus depot and then we checked in at a hotel down the street called the Jefferson. I let him sign first, and stalled shaking a clot out of the pen until he'd already started toward the elevator. Then I wrote "Ned Baker" under his name, "Frisco." That was far enough away — a big enough place to assure anonymity. I'd met him en route, that was all. I wasn't going to do it to him right here in this hotel, anyway, and there was no earthly reason for him to take another look at that register in checking out, nor for the clerk to mention me by name in his presence; we'd paid in advance on account of our scarcity of baggage.

He asked for a ten-thirty call and hung a "Do-not-disturb" on the door when we got up to the room. Then we turned in, one to a bed. "I'm dead," was the last thing he yawned.

"You betcha sweet life you are, brother!" I thought grimly. He dropped off into a deep, dreamless sleep — his last one. I knew I was safe enough while I had him right with me, and until he got ready to start back; I wasn't going to do it in this hotel room anyway. So I just lay there on my back staring up at the ceiling, waiting, waiting. The wings of the death-angel were spread over us in that room; there was the silence of the grave.

The phone-peal, when it came, shattered it like a bomb. I felt good, because the time was drawing shorter now. This new self of mine seemed to be agreeing with me. "Toss you for the shower," I offered.

"Go ahead," he stretched, "I like to take my time."

It was a little thing like that changed my plans, brought it on him even quicker. Just before I turned on the water I heard him open and close the door. He called in, "Gee, pretty liberal! They hand you a morning paper compliments of the management in this place!"

When I came out he was sitting there on the bed with it spread out alongside of him. He wasn't looking at it, he was looking at me; he was holding his head as though he'd been waiting for me to show up in the bathroom doorway. There were three white things there on that bed, but it was his face that was whiter even than the pillows or the paper.

"What're you looking at me like that for?" I said gruffly, and then my own got white too.

He began shrinking away from me along the edge of the bed. He said: "They found your body in the cellar of your house — last night at eleven — you committed suicide. It's here, on the first page of this Jefferson paper —"

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I dropped the towel and picked the paper up, but I didn't look at it, I was watching him over the top of it. He was shaking all over. He said, "Who — was that? Who'd you do it to?"

"This is a mistake," I said furrily. "They've got me mixed up with somebody else. Somebody by the same name, maybe —"

His back was arched against the head-board of the bed by now, as if he couldn't get far enough away from me. He said, "But that's your address there — 25 Copeland Drive — I know your address! It even tells about your working for the store — it gives your wife's name, Thelma — it tells how she found your body, with your face all eaten away with lye —" I could see beads of sweat standing out in a straight line across his forehead. "Who was that, Cook? It must have been — somebody! My God, did *you* —?"

I said, "Well, look at me! You see me here with you, dontcha? You can see it's not me, can'tcha?" But that wasn't what he was driving at, and I knew it as well as he did. He knew I was alive, all right; what he wanted to know was who was dead.

I don't know what the outcome would have been, if he hadn't given himself away by starting to dress in that frightened, jerky way — snatching at his clothes as if he was afraid of me, trying to stay as far out of my way as he could while he struggled getting his things on. I suppose it would have happened anyway, before I would have let him go back to our own town, knowing what he now did. But not right then, not right there.

I told myself, coldly, as I watched him fumbling, panting, sweating to get into his things in the least possible time, "He's going straight out of here and give me away! It's written all over him. He won't even wait till he gets back tonight — phone them long distance right from here, or else tip the cops off right here in Jefferson. Well — he's not going to get out that door!"

The phone was between the two beds. He was bent over on the outside of his, which was nearest the door, struggling with his laces. What was holding him up was that in his frenzied haste he'd snarled them up into a knot. The door didn't worry me as much as the phone. I moved around, naked, into the aisle between the two beds, cutting him off from it.

"Why all the rush?" I said quietly.

"I gotta hustle and get after those ties," he said in a muffled voice. He couldn't bring himself to look around at me, rigidly kept his head turned the other way.

I moved up closer behind him. My shadow sort of fell across him, cutting off the light from the window. "And what're you going to do about what you just read in the paper?"

"Why, nothing," he faltered. "I — I guess like you said, it's just some kind of mistake —" His voice cracked into a placating little laugh; you wouldn't have known what it was by the sound of it, though. And the last thing he ever said was to repeat,

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"Nothing — nothing at all, really."

"You're blamed tooting you're not," I rasped. I don't know if he even heard me. I suddenly pulled him down flat on his back, by the shoulders, from behind. I had a last flash of his face, appalled, eyes rolling, staring up at mine. Then the two pillows were over it, soft, yielding, and I was pressing them down with my whole weight.

Most of the struggle, of course, was in his legs, which had been hanging down free over the side of the bed. They jolted upward to an incredible height at first, far higher than his head, then sank all the way back to the floor again, and after that kept teetering upward and downward like a seesaw between bed-level and the floor.

It was the very fact that they were loose like that that prevented his throwing me off him. He was off-balance, the bed ended just under his hips, and he couldn't get a grip on the floor with his heels. As for his arms, they were foreshortened by the pressure of the big pillows like a bandage. He only had the use of them below the elbows, couldn't double them back on themselves far enough to get at my face, claw as he might. I kept my face and neck arched back just beyond their reach, holding the pillows down by my abdomen in the center and by the pressure of my shoulders and splayed arms on each end.

The bedsprings groaned warningly once or twice of approaching doom. Outside of that there wasn't a sound in the room but my own breathing.

The leg-motion was the best possible barometer. It quickened to an almost frenzied lashing as suffocation set in, then slowed to a series of spasmodic jerks that would slacken inevitably to a point of complete motionlessness. Just before it had been reached, I suddenly reared back and flung the pillows off, one each way. His face was contorted to the bursting-point, his eyes glazed and sightless, but the fingers of his upturned hands were still opening and closing convulsively, grabbing at nothing; he was unmistakably still alive, but whether he could come back again or would succumb anyway in a minute or two more was the question. It was important to me to beat his heart to the final count.

I dragged him off the bed, around the second bed, and got him over to the window. I hoisted him up, turned him toward it, and balanced him lightly with one arm against my side, as if I was trying to revive him. I looked, and I looked good. The room was on the fourteenth floor, and we'd taken one of the cheaper ones; it gave onto an air-shaft, not the street. There were, probably, windows all the way down, under this one — but the point was, there weren't any *opposite*, that side was blank. No one could look in here.

I think he would have pulled through; he was beginning to revive as air got into his lungs. The congested blood started leaving his face little by little, his eyes closed instead of staying wide open, but you could

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hear him breathing again, hoarsely. So I edged him a little closer, threw up the lower sash all the way to the top — and just stepped back from him. I didn't touch him, just took my support away, retreated farther into the room. He wavered there, upright by the open window. Vertigo had evidently set in as his lungs began to function and his heartbeat came back to normal. It was a toss-up whether he'd go back, forward, or sideways; the only sure thing was he wasn't staying on his own feet just then, and was going into a faint.

Maybe there was some kind of a draught pulling at him from the long, deep shaft out there, I don't know. He went forward — as though a current of air were sucking him through the window. It was a good high window. His head just missed the sash bisecting it. He folded up at the waist across the ledge, half in, half out, like a lazy guy leaning too far out in slow motion — and gravity did the rest. Death beat his glimmering faculties to the punch — he was gone before he could fling up his arms, grab at anything. His legs whipped after him like the tail of a kite — and the window-square was empty.

The impact seemed to come up long afterwards, from far away, muffled, distant, and even the new me didn't like the sound of it very well. I didn't make the mistake of going closer and looking down after him. Almost immediately there was the sound of another window being thrown up somewhere down the line, a pause, and then a woman's screech came tearing up the shaft.

I saw that one of his unlaced shoes had come off while I was hauling him across the room. I edged it back under his own bed, smoothed that from a condition of having been struggled upon back to a condition of just having been slept in, particularly the pillows. I erased a blurred line across the carpet-nap that his one dragging shoe had made, with the flat of my own shoe.

Then I picked up the towel I'd already wet once, went back into the bathroom, turned on the shower full-blast, and got back under it again. Its roar deadened everything, but a sudden draft on my wet shoulder tipped me off when they'd used the passkey on the room-door. "Hey, Sherrill!" I boomed out just as they came in, "can I borrow some of your shaving-cream?" I stuck my head farther out and hollered, "What's the matter with ya, didya go back to sleep in there? That's the third time I've asked ya the same question —"

Then I saw them all standing looking in at me. "What's up?" I yelled, and reached out and shut off the water.

The sudden silence was stunning.

The hotel detective said, "Your roommate just fell out of the window in there."

"Oh, my God!" I gasped, and had to hang onto the rubber curtain to keep from tipping over, myself, for a minute. Some soap got in my eyes and made them fill with water. Through

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it I could see them all looking at me, from the bellhop up, as though they knew how bad I felt, and felt sorry for me.

Three weeks to the day, after that morning in the hotel at Jefferson, Thelma's message was waiting for me in my mail-box at the Marquette in Middleburg. I had been holed-up there for two weeks past, from the moment I'd felt it prudent to leave Jefferson. Not that I'd been under arrest or even suspicion at any time, but the detectives there had, naturally, questioned me about how well I'd known Sherrill, whether he'd said anything to indicate he intended suicide. I seemed to satisfy them on all points.

They kept me waiting another twenty-four hours — and on pins and needles. Then they sent word that I was free to leave whenever I wanted to. I didn't waste time hanging around once I heard that! It struck me that I hadn't been called on to make a deposition at any coroner's inquest, but I wasn't inclined to argue with them on that point. Nor did I bother trying to find out what disposition had been made of Sherrill's remains. I simply left — while the leaving was good!

Beautifully as I'd got away with that, though, I had plenty of other things to get jittery about while I was waiting to hear from her the next couple weeks in Middleburg. I kept wondering whether she was going to doublecross me or not, and the suspense got worse day by day and hour by hour. If she did, I had no come-back.

She'd soaped me up by saying all I had to do if she tried to hold out was show up home and give her away. True enough as far as it went, but there was one thing I'd overlooked at the time: what was to keep her there on tap once she got her paws on the insurance check? All she had to do was blow out in some other direction and — goodbye ten grand!

That was what really had me down, the knowledge that she had been holding a trump-hand all through this little game of ours — with me trying to bluff her. And from what I knew of her, she didn't bluff easy. I'd even set a deadline in my own mind: forty-eight hours more, and if I didn't hear from her, I'd head back home myself, no matter what the risk, and land on her with both feet before she took a powder out on me.

Nothing had muffed at her end — I knew that for a fact; so she couldn't alibi that she wasn't in line for the money. I'd been buying our home-town papers daily ever since I'd been in Middleburg, watching to see if the thing would curdle or start to smell bad, and it hadn't.

It would have been in headlines in a minute if it had, but all I had were the few consecutive items bearing on it that I'd clipped out and stuck away in my wallet. I'd been taking them out nightly and going over them, to reassure myself, and it was as good as television. First, the news announcement that had sent Sherrill to his

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death (although he'd seen it in a Jefferson, not a hometown paper).

Then an inconspicuous obituary the next day, mentioning a date for the cremation. Then a twenty-four-hour postponement of the cremation, with no reason given (this had given me a bad night, all right!). Then finally, two days later, the bare announcement that the cremation had taken place the day before. That was all, but that was plenty. The thing was signed, sealed, and delivered — we'd got away with it!

Even outside of all that, anyone in my position, naturally, would have been jittery. Just having to sit tight day by day waiting for the pay-off, was reason enough. The one hundred and seventy-five dollars I'd chiseled out of her was starting to run down; I wanted to get my hands on the real dough and get out of this part of the country altogether. Middleburg, after all, wasn't so very far away from the hometown. Somebody who had known me might drop over from there and spot me when I least expected it; the young mustache I was nursing along was no guarantee at all against recognition.

I stayed in my room most of the time, let them think what I'd told Sherrill, that I was in precarious health. I began to look the part, too, so it wasn't hard to sell the idea. I haunted my letter-box downstairs, and just went as far as the corner-stand once a day, to get the hometown paper, the Kay City *Star*. I always soft-pedaled it by buying a Jefferson one and a Middleburg one along with it, and then discarding them in the nearest trash-can.

And up in my room I always tore the name and place of publication off the tops of every page of each copy, carefully burning the strips in an ash-tray, so the chambermaid or anyone else finding it wouldn't know just where it was published.

I had a bad minute or two one evening when the news vendor couldn't find me a copy of the hometown rag. "They usually send me two," he apologized, "but they were one short today, and there's another gent been buying 'em right along, like you do yourself, and he musta got here ahead of you, I guess, and took the only one I had —"

I got very quiet, then finally I said off-handedly, "He a regular customer of yours? How long's he been doing that?"

"Oh, two, three weeks now — 'bout as long as you have. He lives right in the same hotel you do, I think; I see him come in and go out of there a lot. Nice guy, minds his own business —"

I said, even more off-handedly than before, "D'je happen to mention to him that I been taking the Kay City *Star* from you too?"

"Nah!" he said emphatically, "I never said 'Boo' to him."

I had to be satisfied with that, and in a day or two my apprehension had dulled again, not having anything further to feed on. The Marquette was no skyscraper honeycomb; I'd seen all

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the faces in it by this time, and there was definitely no one there that knew me or that I knew, or that I'd ever seen before. Nor did the register, when I went over it without much trouble, show any Kay City entries.

The whole thing was just a harmless coincidence, that was all; probably the guy took the *Star* purely for business reasons. There was a pudgy realtor who had the room across the hall from mine; I'd met him once or twice on the elevator, and it was probably he, keeping tab on real estate opportunities in various townships. That reassured me completely; he fitted the newsman's description exactly, and never even so much as looked at me the few times we happened on each other.

One night I eavesdropped while I was unlocking my own door and overheard him having a long argument with somebody over the phone. "That's an ideal site," he was saying. "Tell 'em they can't have it at that price. Why it would be a gold-mine if we leased it for a filling-station —"

On the twenty-first morning after Sherill's death, I stepped up to the hotel desk — and for the first time there was white showing in my letter-box! My overwrought nerves began crackling like high-tension wires. It had a Kay City postmark. In my excitement I dropped it and this real-estate guy, who had come up to the desk for his own mail just then, picked it up and handed it back to me without a word.

I went over in a corner of the lobby and tore it open. There was no signature — probably she hadn't wanted to hand me a blackjack that could be used against her — but it was from her all right. I recognized the writing, although she'd tried to distort it a little, or else her excitement had done that for her.

Jackie has come through pretty. If you want to see him, you know what to do about it. It's up to you to do the traveling, not me. I'm not at the old place any more, so it'll be okay. 10 State Street is where you'll find me.

The way I burned it's a wonder smoke didn't curl out of my ears. So it was up to me to do the traveling, was it? She knew what a chance I'd be taking by showing up home, even if she had changed addresses!

I came to a sudden decision. "All right, for being so smart, she's going to pony over the whole ten grand now! I'm going down there and clean her out! And if she opens her trap, she's going to suddenly quit being alive!"

I folded the thing up, put it in my pocket, and went out. I hit the seedy part of Jefferson, across the railroad tracks, and picked up a .32 and some cartridges at a hock-shop without too many questions asked, particularly the one about where was my license. I came back and I booked a seat on the three o'clock bus, which would get me to Kay City just after dark. I bought a cheap pair of reading glasses and a flat tin of shoe polish. I went back to my room, knocked the lenses

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out of their tortoise-shell rims and heavied up my mustache with a little of the blacking.

At half-past two in the afternoon I went downstairs and paid my bill and turned in my key. The clerk didn't say a word, but I saw him stick a bright-red pasteboard strip like a bookmark in my letter-box. "What's that for?" I asked idly.

"That's to show it's available."

"You've got one in the one right next to it too." I squinted.

"Yeah, 919, across the hall from you, checked out about half an hour ago too."

The only thing that kept me from getting flurried was that his check-out had come ahead of mine, and not after; otherwise I'd have suspected there was something phony about it. But this way, how could he have possibly known I intended leaving myself, when the first warning I'd given was this very minute?

"Just the same," I said to myself, "he's been taking the Kay City *Star* every day. I'm gonna take a good look in that bus, and if he's in it, I don't get on. I'm not taking any chances, not gonna lay myself open the way I did running into Sherrill!"

I timed myself to get to the depot just five minutes ahead of starting-time. The bus was standing there waiting to go. I walked all down one side of it, gandering in every window, and then doubled back on the other side, doing the same thing, before I got on. There wasn't a sign of him.

I found my seat and sat down on the edge of it, ready to hop off if he showed at the last moment. He didn't.

I looked them all over after a while, and there wasn't anything about any of them to call for a second look. Nor did I get even a first one from anybody. It was dark by the time we hit Ferndale, and about nine thirty when we got into Kay City at the downtown terminus. I slipped on the lensless pair of rims just before the doors opened, and didn't waste any time lingering about the brightly-lighted depot. Outside in the street-dusk I'd pass muster, as long as I didn't stop to stare into any glaring shop windows.

State Street was a quiet residential thoroughfare lined with prosperous residences; it was nearer in to the heart of the city than where we had lived, though. I reconnoitered number 10 from the opposite side of the street, going past it first and then doubling back. It was just a substantial brick house, two-storied, without anything about it to make me leery. Only one window, on the ground floor, showed a light. I thought, "What the hell is she doing in a place like that?" I decided she must have rented a furnished room with the family that owned it.

I crossed over farther down, and then once more started back toward it. There wasn't a soul on the street, at the moment. Instead of going right up to the door, I edged around to the window where the light was and took a look in.

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Thelma was in the room there, and she seemed to be alone. She was right in a line with the window, sitting by herself in a big chair, holding a cigarette and staring intently over into a corner which I couldn't see from where I was. I could tell she was under a strain — the hand holding the cigarette shook visibly each time she lifted it. I waited a while, then I tapped lightly on the pane.

She looked square over at me, didn't show a bit of surprise. She jerked her head in the direction of the front door, but didn't get up or anything. I went around to it and tried it cautiously. She'd left it on the latch, for me to walk in without ringing. I closed it softly behind me, tapped the .32 in my pocket, and moved a few paces down the hall, listening. The house was dead; the people were out, whoever they were.

I put my hand on the side-door that led to the room where she was and pushed it open. She was still sitting there, shakily holding that cigarette. "Hello, Cookie," she said in a funny voice.

"Hello, yourself," I growled, and I looked all around the room. It was empty, of course. There was another, leading out somewhere toward the back, its door standing wide open, but I couldn't see a thing through it.

"Did you get my note?" she said. Then she said: "You've come back to kill me, of course. I've had a feeling it would end up that way all along. Is that it, in your pocket there?" And her eyes rolled around spasmodically, not at all matching the quiet dryness of her voice.

I said, "What's the matter with you, you paralyzed or something? Whaddya keep sitting there like that for? Gimme the dough, all of it!"

She said, "What was our arrangement, again?"

"Twenty-five, seventy-five, with you on the short end. But that's out, now; I'm taking the whole works — and here's the convincer —" I took the gun out slowly.

The cigarette fell, but she still didn't move.

"Up!" a voice said in my ear, and I could feel snub-nosed steel boring into my spine through my clothes. Then half of Kay City seemed to come into the room all at one time, through the door behind me and also through that other one opposite. One guy even stood up from behind the big easy chair she'd been in all along, a gun on me across her shoulder.

I let the .32 drop and showed my palms. I knew the Kay City chief of police by a picture of him I'd once seen. "Well," he purred, "nice of you to drop in at my house like this! Wrists out, please!"

I said to her, "You dirty, double-crossing —"

"I didn't cross you, Cookie," she said wearily. "They tumbled the very next day —"

"Shut up!" I raged at her.

"That's all right, Cook," the chief of police said soothingly. "The guy was never cremated at all — we saw to that. We inserted that phony an-

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nouncement in the paper ourselves. She's been in custody ever since — it's just that we were waiting for the insurance check to come through, to use in evidence. You thought you were good, didn't you? Want me to tell you what you had for breakfast Tuesday? Or what tune you whistled when you were getting ready for bed a week ago Sunday night? No trouble at all!"

They had to hold me up between them. "I didn't kill him," I gasped, "it was self-defense —"

The fat realtor from the Marquette came around in front of me. "Maybe it was self-defense when you pushed Sherrill out of the window in Jefferson?"

"I was taking a shower, I didn't have anything to do with —"

"Sherrill didn't die," he said. "A couple of clothes-lines at the bottom of that shaft were kinder to him than you were. He's been in a hospital down there with his back in a plaster-cast for the past three weeks. Crippled for life, maybe, thanks to you — but able to talk. He told us all about it, that's how it blew up at this end."

Something seemed to blow up in me too, the way it had that night. I was Ben Cook again, who'd never done anything wrong in his life. It was as if the streak of badness had worked itself out, somehow.

I shuddered and covered my face with my manacled hands. "I'm — I'm sorry. Well, you've got me, and maybe it's all for the best — I'm ready to take what's coming to me —"

"Don't worry, you're going to," said the chief of police. "Take him over to headquarters and book him. Take her back to the cooler."

As we were leaving, one of the detectives said: "All for ten grand! If you'da just hung on a little while longer, you'da gotten it without lifting your finger — like that!" He took out a cablegram from his pocket.

It was addressed to me, at the old address. It had come in only a couple days before. It was from London, from some attorney I'd never heard of. It informed me my first wife, Florence, had died two months before and left me a legacy of more than three thousands pounds. Ten thousand dollars!

I didn't show any emotion at all. Just turned to them and asked them if they'd do me a favor.

"Give you a swift kick, I suppose," one of them sneered.

"It's mine to do with as I want, isn't it, this dough? Turn it over to Sherrill, will you, for me? Maybe it'll help to get him fixed up so he can walk again."

They all looked at me in surprise, as though this was out of character, coming from me. It really wasn't, though. None of us are one hundred percent bad and none of us are one hundred percent good — we're all just kind of mixed, I guess. Maybe that's why the Judge, the Higher One, feels sorry for us. A whole row of black marks and then a single white mark at the very end. Which cancels which? I'll find out for sure pretty soon now . . .

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